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Henderson, Lesley M. (2002) Social issue story lines in British soap opera. PhD thesis

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SOCIAL ISSUE STORY LINES IN BRITISH SOAP OPERA

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**A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy**

University of Glasgow

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May 2002

Abstract

This thesis examines the factors which influenced how social issue story lines were developed in the areas of sexual violence, breast cancer and mental distress in British soap opera in the mid to late 1990's. The soap opera production process was examined by conducting interviews with members of production teams from different programmes. This core study was contextualised by additional interviews with production personnel working in other areas of television (e.g. documentary). Spokespeople from different organisations who consulted on story lines or lobbied around different issues were also interviewed. In total, 64 interviews were conducted. The influence of soap story lines on public understandings of an issue was explored in an audience reception study of sexual violence in *Brookside* (12 focus groups).

The soap opera production study identified a number of factors which influence story line development (socio - cultural positioning of the substantive topic, broadcast hierarchy and commercial imperatives). The comparative study of mental distress identified some cross genre constraints (narrative pace, commercial imperatives) and some genre specific issues (access to people with mental health problems). The audience study revealed that people bring their social knowledge of an issue to their viewing experience. Research participants 'read' the meanings of *Brookside's* story line in remarkably uniform ways however some participants responded differently to certain elements of the story (rejecting empathy with the 'collusive' mother). The story line was demonstrated to have made a lasting impact on *Brookside* viewers (in relation to the conflicting emotions of the abused child). There were also identifiable links between the intentions of the production team, the nature of representation and audiences responses.

The thesis argues that the soap format has the potential to influence public understandings in different ways from other media but this should not be uncritically celebrated. The television soap story line should be viewed as a social product, made for specific purposes which constrain its' development and how it may be used.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisors Greg Philo and Jenny Kitzinger for their guidance and valuable advice. I am also grateful to colleagues from my time spent in the Sociology Department at Glasgow University, especially to fellow members of the Media Research Unit, Jacquie Reilly and David Miller. Thanks are due to John Eldridge and to Bridget Fowler for their continued support. My family have consistently encouraged me and I would especially like to thank my sister, Lorna. My love and thanks to Simon Carter for all his help and to Louis Henderson-Carter who was born in the final year of writing this thesis.

Finally, thanks to all of the interviewees who helped with this research by spending their valuable time discussing soaps and different issues with me. The study would not have been possible without you.

Author's Declaration

Some of the interview material presented in chapters four, five and six has appeared in two published book chapters:

Henderson, L. 1999. 'Producing Serious Soaps', in G. Philo (ed) *Message Received*. Essex: Longman.

Henderson, L. 1996. 'Selling Suffering: Mental Illness and Media Values' in G. Philo (ed) *The Media and Mental Distress*. Essex: Longman.

A version of chapter seven was submitted as evidence to the National Commission of Inquiry into Child Abuse, on behalf of Channel Four Television. A section of this submission was published in an HMSO report.

(1996) *Childhood Matters: The Report of the National Commission of Inquiry into Child Abuse*: London. HMSO.

Chapter 1: Introduction: "why study social issue story lines in television soap opera?"

INTRODUCTION

My interest in 'social issues' and television soap opera began when I was providing temporary research assistance on an ESRC funded project investigation into how child sexual abuse was reported in British press and television (Kitzinger and Skidmore 1995a). Around the same time, late February 1993, a British television soap opera began a powerful fictional story line of sexual violence and abuse thus bringing the topic to new and different audiences.

The soap in question was Channel Four's *Brookside* and the story line was played out through a new family who were introduced to 'the Close', the Jordache's. As the story progressed, viewers discovered that Mandy and her two daughters were living in a 'safe house' in hiding from Trevor who had been violent to his wife and sexually abused his daughter Beth. As the plot unfolded, British audiences were gripped by Trevor's pursuit of his family and watched him charm his way back into their lives. Within a few weeks Trevor had resumed his violent ways and in one episode after viciously beating Mandy, Trevor was seen to climb into bed with his younger daughter. Trevor's rape of Rachel had a profound effect on Mandy. In the midst of a violent assault, Mandy reached for a kitchen knife and fatally stabbed him. Rather than risk going to the police the women decided to bury the body in the garden.

Brookside's Jordache story was a cultural event. The fictional plot attracted extensive attention in the British media. A deluge of press reports covered and debated each new plot twist, scenes of sexual violence, unprecedented for a pre-Watershed British soap, were investigated by the Broadcasting Standards Council and new publicity was generated when British soap opera saw its first lesbian kiss (Beth begins an affair with friend Margaret). In real life the actors were invited to lend publicity to public awareness campaigns on behalf of Zero Tolerance (a feminist campaign designed to challenge public attitudes towards

domestic violence). Women's refuges reported a marked increase in telephone calls from women in similar situations, seeking support. Telephone help lines ran after key episodes revealed an unusually high response from young people (compared to documentaries). When Beth and Mandy were finally tried and found guilty of Trevor's murder two years later in 1995, Channel Four managed to capture their greatest ever audience share (28% of the available audience) and nearly 20 million people watched the trial¹. Spin off merchandise from the story included Beth's diaries in which the character reveals her emotional response to coming to terms with her abuse.

The background to this development and the consequences for public understandings seemed worthy of serious consideration². The social problem of child sexual abuse was certainly not new but it was a topic whose public profile had dramatically increased due to media attention over the past 15 years. Public awareness that child sexual abuse exists, that it is more widespread than previously thought and that it has damaging consequences has been attributed to media coverage (Kitzinger and Skidmore 1995a). The framing of the issue in the television soap provoked a series of questions. Were fictional portrayals simply re-working the same themes in news media or was it possible that a

¹ The Jordache trial was also the first time that a British soap transmitted episodes for five nights in a row, a technique which has since been repeated by other soaps.

² I originally monitored coverage of child sexual abuse in television fiction for 12 months (July 1992-93) and identified a total of 34 drama series, over 50 single episodes which portrayed the topic of child sexual abuse. Although academic attention had focused on factual media accounts (press, television news and documentary) there had been no similar study of fictional representations. There was therefore a crucial gap in the literature and I began to explore how and why this topic in its various forms (from 'incest' to teacher-pupil 'affair') had come to be portrayed so frequently within television drama (plays, films, soap operas and drama serials). The original aim of the study was thus to contrast the potential for different media formats to tackle a single substantive topic. However, I had the opportunity to study other serious issues on soaps too and decided that a comparative approach would be more insightful and guard against unwarranted over-generalisation from a single substantive issue.

genre such as soap with its unresolved narrative structure might be able to present audiences with more challenging themes? What were the motivations of the *Brookside* production team in deciding to tackle a presumably risky topic in terms of audiences? Did the topic present problems and dilemmas for television soap opera which are quite different to those facing production teams working in other television formats? How do audiences respond to this material in what has been traditionally perceived as a 'safe' viewing space, the early evening soap opera? Finally, I was interested in the extent to which these questions could be addressed fully by exploring just one substantive area or just one soap opera and to guard against over generalisation I decided to broaden my investigation to explore diversity of topic and production.

This thesis uses a series of in - depth case studies to explore how 'sensitive' or 'difficult' social issue story lines were developed in television soap operas, broadcast during the period 1993 to 1997. The case studies include *Brookside's* Jordache story line in which incest and domestic abuse was portrayed in the family. However this case study is contextualised by addressing how other soaps developed story lines along similar themes (including sexual abuse in *Emmerdale*). In the interests of examining the importance of substantive topic an additional two case studies were conducted. The first of these explores the production of breast cancer story lines in *Brookside* and *EastEnders* and the second, explores the development of a mental distress story line in *Coronation Street*. In order to address the extent to which the production priorities of soap production teams are applicable to other non-news television formats an additional case study has been included. This case study explores the different production priorities of those working in other areas (e.g. television documentary, 'research' medical drama series) in relation to producing programmes about mental distress. Finally, the ways in which social issue story lines may influence audience understandings is explored by returning to *Brookside's* Jordache story and presenting a case study of how different audiences interpreted this story line.

The overall concern has been to examine diversity (across soaps and other non-news television formats as well as across substantive topics). A related

concern has been to explore the inter-relatedness of production, content and audience reception. The thesis study has been structured to map the motivations and priorities of a number of television production personnel; to examine the factors which influence the nature of representation and to assess the possible impact of the soap opera story line on audiences.

The aim of this introduction is to position the research study and explain why studying social issues in television soap opera is an important research question. The chapter concludes with an outline of the structure of the thesis.

WHY STUDYING SOCIAL ISSUES IN SOAPS IS IMPORTANT

The format of soap opera is worthy of serious study for a number of reasons.

Firstly, British soap story lines reach large audiences and are discussed across different media formats (from television news and press to magazines and internet sites). Secondly, the soap genre has infiltrated other media formats (for example, the prime time drama, the social documentary) ensuring that its role within the current broadcasting climate has never been so heavily debated. Thirdly, the soap opera plays a central role within current debates about the blurring of 'hard' and 'soft' news. As news media currently faces criticism over 'dumbing down' in terms of content and presentation, the soap opera has emerged as a format within which controversial or socially sensitive issues are played out. Fourthly, soaps have always played a part in social education although this has been observed elsewhere (notably developing countries where the soap has been used explicitly for social education purposes) the British soap has from time to time been developed in order to modify public behaviour (particularly in health behaviour). Finally, the British soap in the 1990's has been marked by producing story lines about increasingly controversial topics. This new direction has generated explicit criticism from different organisations (from activists in the field to 'official' organisations such as the British Medical Association). At the same time however the British soap has never been so keenly lobbied by campaigners to aid in public awareness

campaigns and soap story lines have even been used to reinforce Government policy (Franklin 1999). The following sections develop these points in more detail.

"Everyone's talking about it": the reach of soap opera

British soap operas still consistently attract the largest audiences for any fictional and factual programming across all broadcast channels. Indeed the sheer levels of audiences which the television soap reaches make the soap opera worthy of inquiry for any research into media power. For example, looking at a list of the ten top rated television programmes in the week ending 4th November 2001 reveals that no fewer than nine of these programmes were in fact episodes of soap operas drawing viewing figures of between 11 and 17 million people (BARB figures). The scale of such audiences means that soaps remain firmly at the forefront of a channels' economic success in contemporary broadcasting and changes in British broadcasting culture have been marked by the domination of soaps in television schedules. Indeed the main five television channels were producing 11 and a half hours of soap opera per week, which rose to 15 hours in the 2001 Autumn schedules (Brown 2001). The growth has been ascribed to intensified competition for large audiences at a low cost. However the domination of the soaps has been viewed very negatively as marking a departure from programming diversity to bland and homogenous broadcasting (Brown 2001).

The proliferation of soaps has also become an obvious indication of the current changing broadcasting climate. Over recent years British soaps have increased the frequency of transmission from two episodes per week to three episodes or more plus accompanying weekend omnibus editions. BBC1 soap opera *EastEnders* now transmits four episodes per week, *Emmerdale* is now screened every week day on ITV and after a period of 13 years ITV has revived the much derided *Crossroads* (transmission from March 2001). These changes have been noted and debated within wider media (Moreton 2001).

Simple counts of viewing figures and programme episodes underestimate the large - scale popularity and potential reach of the genre however. Numerous

publications such as *Inside Soap*, *Soaplife* and *Heat* combined with literally thousands of internet sites devoted solely to soaps ensure continual cross genre obsession with gossip around characters and story lines. The death of a soap character now traditionally draws comments from programme personnel discussing the impact this upon viewers' lives. It also attracts analysis by journalists with reference to academics attempting to entangle just why fiction can have such an impact on real people. Most of these rehearse the usual arguments about the increasingly fractured lives which people live in which fictional characters appear more real than their own neighbours or relatives (Hilpern 1998). The level of social 'talk' generated by soap story lines has been used for clever marketing purposes by BBC *EastEnders*, who ran an advertising campaign depicting groups of work colleagues, builders and friends excitedly discussing the latest plot twist and closing with the strap line "EastEnders: Everyone's talking about it". The soap actors' personal and fictional lives are endlessly covered in the daily papers due in no small part to the slick PR of the channel's press office. As a spokesperson from the EastEnders office put it "If people ask me when was the last time an actor from EastEnders was in the news, my answer is usually the same: Today" (Hilpern 1998). In these ways then the soap format pervades wider media and social culture and story lines have a reach far and beyond their immediate audiences. Indeed the unique power of soap opera to communicate with large audiences is one which diverse groups seek to replicate. For example, Anglican clerics have been reported as enrolling on training courses to attract and maintain falling congregations in which episodes of *Neighbours* and *EastEnders* are studied as tools to facilitate discussion of ethical issues. As one vicar was quoted as saying:

The soap operas attract millions of viewers. We must learn the key to their success (Dignan 1998).

Soap infiltration

However there are not simply now more episodes of existing soap operas but the form of soap opera as a continuous serial has become less easily defined as it has infiltrated other genres. Medical and police drama series similarly

dominate television viewing schedules (ITV's *The Bill* screened twice weekly and BBC1 *Casualty* and *Holby City*; *Heartbeat* ITV and *Peak Practice* maintain top ten slots in viewing schedules). These programmes are strictly defined as within the genre of drama series (being produced as self-contained episodes to be watched, in theory, in any order). However they do share many of the characteristics of soap opera in interweaving multiple plots with a continuous core cast and concluding with 'cliff-hanging' plot twists (for definitions of soap opera see (Holland 1997: 113-117; or Hobson 1982: 29-35). Such dramas rescued themselves from falling ratings by turning into soaps. For example the revamped version of *The Bill* has seen "stories spill over between episodes and the private lives of the characters eclipse their adventures in uniform" (Moreton 2001).

This proliferation of traditional soaps and what might be termed the 'soap-isation' of other television dramas has been matched by the rise of the 'docu-soap'. These programmes are structured to chart the minutiae of everyday life with recent examples including *Airport*, *Driving School*, *Model Behaviour* and *Hotel*. Reality television shows such as *Survivor* (where cameras record a group of men and women stranded on a desert island) and *Big Brother* (continuous coverage of ten people in an East London house) have been described as 'soaps without a script'³. These programmes have provoked hot debates about the appetite of programme makers and the public alike for cheaply produced, voyeuristic television at the expense of more challenging programming and raised concerns that British television has had its moments of glory. The soap like qualities of these programmes form the basis of accusations of 'dumbing down' television and have triggered constant reviews of the state of British television (Lawson 2001).

³ Programmes such as *Pop Idol* and *Popstars* (LWT) have also proved to be incredibly popular with audiences. These programmes have merged elements of reality television and soap opera in charting the search for a new pop star, with the public voting by telephone each week. In the latest version of this newly emerging format, *Soapstars*, Yorkshire Television made a deal with the actors union Equity to film the search for a new family in the soap opera, *Emmerdale* (Brown 2001).

In part, the extraordinary infiltration of the soap opera has been due to commercial imperatives. Advertising slots in soap opera intermissions remain among the most frequently sought for advertisers, due not simply to the scale of audiences but the unique demographics – soap operas attract the notoriously elusive and advertising friendly 18-35 year old viewer. Director General of the BBC, Greg Dyke has admitted that increased soap production is a sign that the industry at large is experiencing the strain of advertising slow down and is opting for cheaper soaps at the expense of prestige drama (Brown 2001). The role of the soap genre is thus firmly at the heart of debates which have accompanied alleged changes in factual television. These debates have cited the rapid rise in 'reality television' shows; the decline in resource allocation to documentary programming and the alleged 'feminisation' of news media to suggest that British broadcasting is in crisis and becoming audience led to the detriment of 'quality' or challenging programming. The soap opera has probably never before been subject to so much critical debate.

The blurring of 'hard' and 'soft' in TV genres

At the same time as other genres are blurring with soaps, soap operas too have shifted. In fact the fictional soap opera has been criticised for moving into more serious 'fact based' domain of 'hard news', taking on subjects more usually dealt with in the television news bulletin or documentary. Journalists and media sociologists distinguish between 'hard news' and 'soft news' to describe the value and substance of media content however the meaning of the terms is often assumed rather than explicitly defined⁴. 'Soft' news has been described as 'light', 'human interest'; interpretation-based stories (Carter et al. 1998). John

⁴ John Tulloch describes soap operas as "soft news" in his book "Television Drama: agency, Audience and Myth". Indeed the first chapter is entitled "'Soft'News: the space of TV drama" and he would argue that soaps are defined by their relationship to other television genres (including news and documentaries and also the advertisements which punctuate the programme) (Tulloch 1990).

Tulloch has noted that "In professional media discourse hard news is seen to be 'important' as opposed to 'offbeat', for academics and soap opera critics, hard news is 'serious' and (healthy) versus 'impoverished' (and noxious)" (Tulloch 1990: 44). Philip Schlesinger in his study of BBC newsroom culture observed that hard news gathering was considered to be "a man's job" (Schlesinger 1987). In addition to the substantive nature of the event being reported,⁵ other factors make stories hard or soft (positioning of the story, the sources drawn upon and the status of the journalist covering it). Hard news could be said to concern traditional front page and headline stories in which the important issues of the day (often related to 'matters of state' or 'hard science') are reported using elite sources (e.g. politicians or scientists). By contrast, soft news encompasses 'lower status' lifestyle issues on social aspects of life. These 'soft' stories are believed to attract a predominantly female or youth audience which are now being targeted by all sections of the media⁶.

The breaking down of the traditional divisions between 'hard' and 'soft' news has been viewed as a process of 'dumbing down'. Bob Franklin (1997) writing in 'Newszak and news media' observes how contemporary British news media has retreated from investigative journalism "to the preferred territory of 'softer' or 'lighter' stories" (Franklin 1997 :4). In the move towards consumer led news media, Franklin notes that the traditional 'hard news' values which traditionally governed news media editorial policy have all but been abandoned in favour of 'homogeneous snippets' which make few demands on audiences. In Franklins'

5 For example, while a Government announcement about the budget might be considered 'hard', a newspaper interview discussing the implications of childcare allowances on family life would be considered 'soft'.

6 Philip Schlesinger defines soft stories assigned to female journalists as 'abortions, lost babies, the Royal Family, fashions, the Cruft's dog show' ((Schlesinger 1987): 155). Allan cites 'relationships, fashion, beauty and childcare' (Allan, 1998:132-4).

view, news media have become part of the 'entertainment industry'. As he writes below:

Entertainment has superseded the provision of information; human interest has supplanted the public interest; measured judgement has succumbed to sensationalism; the trivial has triumphed over the weighty; the intimate relationships of celebrities from soap operas, the world of sport or the royal family are judged more 'newsworthy' than the reporting of significant issues and events of international consequence. Traditional news values have been undermined by new values; 'infotainment' is rampant (Franklin 1997: 4).

The rise of 'newszak' (Franklin 1997) has been mapped to far-reaching changes across the entire British news media (regulatory, technological and financial as well as changes to journalistic culture and pressures from increased competition to become more audience led). Indeed some critics have argued that this will result in serious consequences for the role of media and journalism (Franklin 1997)⁷. This moving of news media from the 'public' to the 'private' realm has been paralleled by ongoing debates and concern about the changing role not just of soap opera but of documentary programming (Kilborn 1994). The drive within news media to target new audiences of women and young people and accusations that television as a whole is becoming advertiser and focus group

⁷ By contrast, McNair argues that 'tabloidisation' is not necessarily to the detriment of 'quality'. He presents the view that 'quality', relates to "a particular set of news values, a particular style and presentation of the world which focuses on the worthy issues of politics, economic and foreign affairs, while paying less attention to the unworthy concerns of human interest and trivia" (McNair 1998): 121. Furthermore, he adds that " For some (members of the audience) the genres of 'true crime', real-life rescue and celebrity lifestyle coverage are as much broadcast journalism as is needed" (McNair 1998):121. I would disagree with these assumptions and the 'true crime' genre is one which is certainly not unproblematic.

led have implications for the occupational practices of news production personnel (Franklin 1997) and (McNair 1998).

These are very important debates which remain absent from traditional academic soap opera analyses. If we consider what is happening in contemporary news media, are we to assume that the soap opera is a cultural product isolated and immune from these wide ranging pressures? It may therefore be particularly valuable to study the production of contemporary television soaps, precisely to assess the extent to which these changes, observed in the arena of factual media are also applicable to the arena of the television soap.

The impact of the soap genres domination of the viewing schedules on British audiences and trend for exploring controversial socially realistic issues has attracted extensive wider media coverage. Soap representations have also become the focus of lay public, lobbying and regulatory organisations' attention in ways which beg critical questions. What might the impact be on audiences? Why is this shift towards increasingly controversial material taking place? What might the role of the media organisation or personnel be in this process? Under what set of circumstances might source organisations exert influence over programme content? However these are questions which have been largely ignored within soap opera literature.

The Soap as Social Education

Although television soaps are perceived as tackling the inconsequential trivia of daily life and therefore easily dismissed, in fact there is a great and increasing tradition of covering controversial issues and difficult topics. The use of soap as a tool for social education has been well developed in other countries. Perhaps the most well known and firmly established is *Soul City*, a soap opera shown at 8pm on SABC1- the most popular South African broadcast channel. The programme was developed as part of a multi media "edutainment" strategy in South Africa. This strategy was designed to explicitly harness the potential of drama to communicate with audiences and has been running since 1992 with the aim of empowering individuals and communities. Here, the soap opera

forms part of a five pronged approach to eliciting change in social attitudes and health behaviour (other elements include a radio drama, booklets and newspapers, PR, advertising and advocacy and finally education packages). All of these elements combine to use the mass media to reinforce positive messages about diverse issues for example, HIV and AIDS, smoking and tuberculosis (the background to, and evaluation of, specific story lines can be found at <http://www.soulcity.org.za>). Educational telenovelas have also been successfully developed to a strict formula in countries such as Mexico, and structured to bring about social change in relation to reproductive and other social issues. For example, six 'entertainment-education' telenovelas written and produced for Mexican audiences by Miguel Sabido according to his theory based formula were developed to address issues such as family planning, female equality, child abuse, national citizenship, drug abuse and AIDS prevention (Nariman 1993). Studies which have explored the uses of soap opera for communicating explicitly educational or social messages are mainly concerned with developing countries and connected to government literacy and reproductive programmes. There is far less literature on the impact of informational story lines on westernised audiences and crucially on the role and impact of soap operas which are not engaged in educational agendas⁸.

Drama with a social message has of course developed a unique position in British broadcasting culture. The television play *Cathy Come Home* produced by Tony Garnett and directed by Ken Loach is a now classic example of the impact of socially realistic drama on social policy and public attitudes. First broadcast in 1966 it has been credited with raising public awareness and intolerance of homelessness. Indeed the screening of the play is much credited with the formation of the housing charity Shelter which came into existence just two weeks after the play was transmitted (Platt 1999). The programme has also

⁸ British television soaps have been cited as important conduits of information on social issues. A study by British children's charity, Barnardo's revealed that for seven out of ten children, soap operas are the main source of information about HIV/AIDS (Barnardo's 1993).

been positioned as exemplifying how fictional programmes may themselves become events with social and material consequences (Tulloch 1990): 124. The genre of British soap opera has a long tradition of being utilised as a vehicle to promote social values or modify health behaviour. The BBC Radio 4 soap opera, *The Archers* (transmitted 92-95 FM, 198 LW) was devised over fifty years ago with the explicit intention of re-educating farmers and the British public in post - war food issues. More recently this radio soap opera has been subject to cultural comment due to the inclusion of domestic violence and breast cancer story lines, a significant move out with the original agenda prompting the question "Are there story lines that soaps shouldn't touch?" (Arnold 2000).

Coronation Street, was developed in 1960 and is now the longest running and indeed still one of the most popular British soap operas on television. The programme emerged at a crucial moment in British cultural history and was seen to capture 1950's working class life in a unique way which reflected upon Richard Hoggart's *Uses of Literacy* (1959). In 1998, *Coronation Street* was credited with 'defining modern TV soap' when reality and fiction blurred in a story line. Fictional character Deirdre Rachid who was sent to prison for credit card fraud became the object of campaigning by *The Sun* newspaper and in a populist gesture received the support of newly elected British Prime Minister, Tony Blair (Moreton 2001). The programme may also be seen to reflect changes in soap culture at large when the first transsexual character in a British soap was introduced. This prompted comments that *Coronation Street* was finally giving up its traditional identity as a soap which "steered clear of the more controversial subject matters of incest, child abuse, and lesbian love affairs which have been Brookside's meat and drink" (Ahmed 1998).

The increase in controversial story lines

In the 1990's British soap operas have taken on a series of controversial 'social message' story lines. The controversies in the mid 1980's over depicting school girl Michelle Fowlers 'teenage pregnancy' in *EastEnders* (1985) have become eclipsed by fictional treatments of heavily stigmatized social problems (alcoholism and schizophrenia) potentially fatal disease (AIDS, HIV and various

cancers) and physical and sexualised violence ('wife-battering', incest and 'date rape'). Indeed when *EastEnders* revisited teenage pregnancy fifteen years later, character Sonia Jackson, received nothing like the social opprobrium awarded Michelle and the story line was not singled out for such widespread criticism (Smith 2000). In the year 2000 what might be considered a final soap taboo was breached when Channel 4's teenage soap *Hollyoaks* became the first to tackle male rape. The act occurred in a special late evening transmission but subsequent story lines developed the impact of this experience on 'Luke' and his close relationships, particularly his girlfriend and father. This development was cited as evidence that "popular drama's need to address spurious 'big issues' is getting out of control" (Peretti 2000).

At the same time, the soap genre has broadened its traditionally white, heterosexual landscape to attempt the inclusion of marginalized groups by introducing a range of ethnic minority characters, dealing intermittently with 'racist attacks' and portraying gay and lesbian relationships. Although it has been observed that the success with which these changes have taken place is still debatable (Geraghty 1991) the relationship which exists between soap and 'the real world', fact and fiction, is undoubtedly synergistic. News reports frequently borrow from current soap story lines to add a 'hook' or 'peg' for a story. Particularly controversial soap story lines regularly attract press and television coverage and soap production teams frequently generate story lines on the basis of specific real life events.

The debate about controversial story lines: soap as a site of struggle

The routine portrayal of 'hard' subject matter in prime-time 'entertainment' slots has sparked repeated discussions about the cultural role of the soap form. Furthermore, the impact on audiences, of soaps 'increased' blurring of reality and fiction is a frequent topic of media debate across the political spectrum (e.g. 'Women's Hour: Soap Special *Radio Four*. May 1997). Typical newspaper headlines include for example, 'We know that life can be cruel. But has Brookside finally gone too far? (Laurance 1997); 'Nobody thinks this is real...do

they?' (McCartney 1997) and 'No Ender misery in the Square' (Mirror Reporter 1997).

British soap operas are subject to intense lobbying by diverse groups keen to have their issues incorporated into story lines. The explosion in PR surrounding health and illness issues in particular means that charities compete to place information posters and leaflets in background shots. The billboard standing amidst the Parade of shops in *Brookside* Close has become a coveted place for posters which reflect campaigns in the outside world. The placing of such posters, leaflets or mugs within soap settings is beneficial not just to the charity which receives wider exposure but adds to the realism for productions (e.g. making hospital or GP surgery environments appear more realistic for viewers). However, there is an ambiguous relationship between seeking the public profile which a soap story line can confer and simultaneously policing these story lines. Indeed soap opera production teams are frequently criticised for the negative impact of their story lines on the public. Thus the BBC's *EastEnders* was criticised by both the Irish ambassador to the United Kingdom and the Commission for Racial Equality for "cultural and racial stereotyping" (two episodes shown in September 1997) which depicted Irish characters as "drunken, dirty and feckless". The Irish ambassador was quoted as saying:

Irish people can laugh at themselves but one of the most popular television programmes decided to present an image of Ireland that conforms to old-fashioned negative stereotypes. Cultural and racial stereotyping tends to create barriers between people.

Programmes of this kind can reinforce prejudice (Harnden 1997).

The decisions of fictional characters can also attract public outrage. Bianca Butchers' choice to terminate her first pregnancy when ante natal screening revealed that the fetus had Spina Bifida generated hundreds of telephone calls of protest to the *EastEnders* office (McCartney 1997). *Brookside* was criticised for a story line in which a terminally ill woman begged her family to end her suffering after a GP failed to provide sufficient pain relief. When the programme resolved the issue in an episode in which her daughter and son-in-law smothered her with a pillow the British Medical Association was swift to

respond. The organisation criticised the inaccuracies of the story line (particularly that pain relief would be denied to a patient). The Director General of the Cancer Research Campaign similarly condemned the portrayal of cancer carers forced to buy drugs on the street and perform euthanasia on a relative as “not only unreal, but irresponsible” (Laurance 1997).

However the role of soap operas are not always perceived negatively. In the past, soap opera story lines have attracted praise from health charities and lobbying groups and are now viewed as useful conduits of policy messages. *Brookside* was praised by Education Secretary David Blunkett for supporting the Governments' National Year of Reading Initiative with the story of Niamh Musgrove forced to admit to reading difficulties when offered the chance of promotion at work (Garner 2001). The same soap was also recently awarded the first National Childbirth Trust baby friendly award for portraying breastfeeding positively, (very unusually for British television) showing a baby suckling at his mothers breast (Henderson et al. 2000).

STUDYING THE SOAP OPERA

Despite the substantial body of academic literature which has focused on the television soap opera there has been relatively little attention given to the concerns I have highlighted here. Academic attention has focused primarily on the meanings and pleasures of the genre and the relationship between text and 'female' spectator (Geraghty 1991; Ang 1985). Soap operas have been the focus for feminist academics who see the cultural form as having a role to play in women's empowerment and studies of femininity in the soap genre have dominated work in the field (Modleski 1982; Hobson 1982; Brunsdon 1981; Brunsdon et al. 1997). The tradition in which soaps have been studied has tended not to analyse the substantive nature of story content. These explorations of audiences have also largely neglected the soap opera production process, the organisational structures and pressures under which programme-makers operate. There has been some attention given to the institutional context of soap opera (Buckingham 1987) but there has been no significant attempt to examine the conditions under which specific story lines

are developed and to link this to audience interpretations or understandings of issues. It is all the more striking that these concerns have tended to remain confined to analyses of news (for example Schlesinger 1987) given that soap operas appear to also be engaged in 'making sense of' public issues for audiences.

In comparison with the plethora of studies which focus on factual media (the production context and content) there have been remarkably few attempts to examine the role of television fiction in what James Curran has described as the "democratic functioning" of the media (Curran 1991). Curran has argued that media entertainment facilitates public engagement at an "intuitive and expressive level in a public dialogue about the direction of society" and is in this respect an integral part of the media's 'informational' role (Curran 1991: 102). Furthermore, "Public dialogue should encompass the common processes of social life: its outcome should be to revalidate or revise social attitudes patterning social relationships. Media fiction is one important dimension in which this dialogue takes place" (Curran 1991: 102).

Other academics have highlighted the neglect of popular media genres despite the fact that television drama has been identified as important in 'relaying social meanings and cultural forms' (Gripsrud 1995: 21). Academics working in the area of news production have regretted that comparable studies of fiction have not been undertaken (Van Zoonen et al. 1998: 2). As Murdock and Halloran put it succinctly:

Paradoxically, then, we know the least about the production of the very programs that are the most popular with the viewers (Murdock and Halloran 1979: 274).

This would seem to be a significant omission given that both news and soap operas appear to be engaged in the mutual aim of 'making sense of' public issues for audiences. Television fiction in general has become of interest to academics examining how 'public issues' are framed within news media. The format of television drama has been identified as a crucial 'open' space in which more challenging representations may be constructed, in comparison with

relatively 'closed' factual formats of news media (Schlesinger et al. 1983). For example, Philip Schlesinger, Graham Murdock and Philip Elliot identified television fiction as providing important conduits for more challenging representations of 'terrorism' because fiction is not bound by the requirements of objectivity and balance that govern television news (Schlesinger et al. 1983).

This thesis aims to address the concerns that have been highlighted above and to develop other work in the area of soap opera studies and of 'public issue' television. The main concern of this thesis is to investigate how social issue story lines were produced and by mapping the context within which soap content is developed to articulate the values and priorities of the media personnel working in this area. The study is not confined to a single substantive issue nor a single soap opera production team but attempts to map diverse social/health issue story lines across different soaps. A total of 64 interviews were conducted with different media production personnel (and different source organisations). The aim of this was to explore the background to different soap opera story lines in three distinct areas (breast cancer, child sexual abuse/sexual violence, mental distress). The production context of different media formats is related to one of these substantive topics (mental distress). Another substantive topic (child sexual abuse/sexual violence) forms the basis of a study of audiences responses to the issue in a television soap (*Brookside*).

AN OVERVIEW OF THE STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

The purpose of chapter one, an introduction and background to the study has been to position the British soap opera within the current socio-economic context and explain in detail why the format is worthy of serious study, particularly at this point.

Chapter two reviews the relevant academic literature and highlights the relative lack of attention to the role of 'production' within the soap opera literature. The modes of inquiry into news production are briefly outlined on the grounds that academic inquiry into the definitional power of the media has been traditionally focused on factual media and the role of the production process is well developed in relation to news media (as contrasted with television fiction). The

chapter addresses how the 'feminine' form of the soap has been taken up largely by the efforts of feminist academics. It argues that these studies have tended to celebrate audience appropriation of textual pleasures or examine the domestic context in which soap opera is watched at the expense of addressing how audiences engage with the substance of texts and the consequences of this. The chapter concludes by positioning the research alongside other work that has investigated the media as a site of social power.

Chapter three outlines the methods and rationale for the research model. The methods used to gather the empirical data are discussed in relation to the distinct case studies (different social issue story lines in the soaps; different television formats and mental distress; audiences response to sexual violence in *Brookside*). The background to interviews with television production personnel and source organisations is discussed in relation to questions of access and conduct of the interview sessions. The chapter concludes by addressing the focus group methodology, purpose and use of the script writing group exercise and finally some ethical considerations which guided the study.

Chapter four introduces the production case studies of different issues in television soaps and highlights the importance of reputation and production philosophies of production team members (*Brookside*, *EastEnders*, *Neighbours*, *Coronation Street* and *Emmerdale*). Here I draw attention to the fact that even within the British context soap operas are not homogeneous nor are soaps intended to only appeal to female audiences. The importance of understanding the production team processes and the role of personal experiences in developing story content is also discussed.

Chapter five presents detailed case studies of breast cancer, child sexual abuse/sexual violence and mental distress story lines in different soap operas and examines the factors which influenced these portrayals. This chapter explores the production background to how different social issues were incorporated into the television soap opera. The chapter addresses how specific story lines were generated, how main characters were cast as well as the ways in which the story lines conformed (or not) to formal structures of the television soap (e.g. narrative pace and cliff-hangers, interweaving of multiple story lines,

maintaining the fictional community). The soap opera production process is demonstrated to be dynamic not static. The decision making involved may follow different routes depending on the topic under discussion and the soap involved. The chapter concludes with discussion and reflections on the commonalities and differences of each topic across different soaps.

Chapter six examines the constraints of production on a single substantive topic, namely mental distress, in different non-news television formats. The different production priorities in developing programmes with the theme of mental distress are discussed in relation to television documentary, single drama and research drama series. The chapter highlights the problems of accessing 'real' people with acute mental health problems and pressure from senior management as well as programme codes and conventions (e.g. priorities of narrative pace). Finally, it is argued that there is not necessarily a correlation between different genres and facilitating more progressive or challenging presentations.

Chapter seven presents a case study of audience responses to one of the substantive areas: child sexual abuse/sexual violence in the Channel Four soap opera *Brookside*. This chapter explores how different audience groups responded to the inclusion of such a topic within the soap genre and in particular, how different socially situated groups responded to characters and story themes. I demonstrate the diversity of audiences responses based on their prior knowledge of the topic and the key differences which were identified between those who had personal experience of sexual abuse (through being abused themselves or working in the field) and those who had no obvious experience of the issue. The case study reveals that, under certain circumstances, soap operas can communicate important messages about such an issue and make a lasting impact on memories. However pre conceived ideas (for example about a 'collusive' mother) are very difficult to challenge.

Chapter eight, discusses the research findings and how they relate to existing literature and current debates in the field of media and cultural studies. The chapter addresses the implications of this research for other groups such as

policy makers, interest groups/ campaigners and television programme makers. Finally, the chapter concludes by identifying some future areas of research

Chapter Two: Media production and soap opera literature

INTRODUCTION

This chapter addresses how media 'production' has been discussed and positions the thesis study in relation to the existing academic literature. This thesis is concerned principally with the production processes of British soap opera (how this influences the content of story lines and in turn, might link to audiences understandings of specific issues). Although how 'media is made' and whose interests it serves, has always been important to studies of the news media, the production of fictional television is still relatively understudied. Most sociological studies of media production have focused on how factual rather than fictional accounts have been produced. Rather than ignore this rich body of literature the studies of news production may be viewed as providing a valuable point of comparison for analysis of television soap opera production.

The chapter therefore begins by briefly identifying some key areas of investigation within the sociology of news production before exploring the literature which relates to the soap genre. This section of the chapter identifies how studies of audience reception have dominated research in the field of soap opera and focused on audiences (mainly female) 'pleasures'. By contrast, with a few exceptions, studies of the soap opera production process (particularly the British context of soap opera production) have been largely neglected or entirely omitted from research in the field. Finally, the thesis study is positioned within critical media studies and work which is concerned with the definitional power of the media, research which has been grouped within the 'public knowledge project'.

STUDYING THE NEWS

The production of news media has developed largely since the mid 1970's. Different studies focusing on how news is selected and constructed, whose interests it may serve and the role of journalists and the freedom (or not)

allowed by the organisation have addressed media production and the media organisation as a site of power. There is therefore a rich literature in this field in which various authors have drawn up typologies of hypotheses about how the production process influences news content. For example, the American sociologist, Herbert J Gans provides a useful overview of different approaches to news and identifies four central perspectives which centre on 1) the role of journalists, 2) the role of the news organization, 3) 'events' and 4) forces outside the news organization (Gans 1980: 78-9). The first hypothesis, that news may be shaped by the professional judgement of journalists has questions of journalistic bias at its core and is commonly used by politicians and indeed social scientists. However social science studies often tend more towards the second perspective (news organization). These studies focus on 'routines' of the news organisation and show how story selection is influenced by different requirements, including for example commercial imperatives and structures and divisions of labour. The third perspective 'event –centred' or 'mirror' theory as it is known, was once popular among the journalistic profession. Put simply, this proposes that events themselves determine story selection. The role of the journalist is then to simply hold a mirror to them and reflect their image to the audience. This extraordinarily simplistic view weakened in 1960's as media critics pointed out what journalists did to and with events transforming them into news stories and called attention to events that failed to become news (Schudson 1993). Finally, the fourth perspective identified by Gans, focuses on the role of forces outside the news organization. Some academics have argued that news is shaped by those groups in society powerful enough to create "public events" and gain access to journalists (Molotch and Lester 1974).

Similar maps to overarching theories of news production have been produced by other authors. For example, Professor Dennis McQuail identifies five main competing hypotheses about the content of news media. First, that content reflects social reality; second, that content is influenced by media workers' socialization and attitudes; third, that content is influenced by media organizational routines; fourth, that content is influenced by social institutions and forces and finally that content is a function of ideological positions and maintains the status quo (McQuail 1994: 186). More recently, Brian McNair

(1988) grouped together five categories of social factors which influence journalists' work (McNair 1998). These incorporated the professional ethics and codes of journalists; politicians and political systems (including censorship and regulatory influences); economics (for example, proprietorial control), technologies of news gathering and finally extramedia social forces such as pressure groups. Although McNair points out that media studies literature has tended to group the study of the influences exerted by politics and economics into one category, known as the politico-economic approach (McNair 1998: 13-16).

Clearly each of these perspectives overlap and some are explicitly rejected by academic studies (e.g. the 'mirror' theory) but others run through studies to a greater or lesser extent. Within the sociological study of news, competing approaches include 'political economy' and 'propaganda', 'symbolic interactionist' and 'culturalist approach'. The field of studying the news is of course more complex than this categorisation implies. For a useful mapping and critique of key approaches to the sociology of journalism see (Franklin 1997: 35 - 47).

Broadly speaking, the political economy or Marxist perspective (proposed by theorists such as Graham Murdock and Peter Golding, Edward S Herman and Noam Chomsky) relates the outcome of the news process to the economic structure of the news organization. For example, Graham Murdock has proposed that "the basic definition of the situation which underpins the news reporting of political events, very largely coincides with the definition provided by the legitimated power holders" (Murdock 1973: 158).

The political economy approach has been criticised as overly simplistic in its proposal that the outcome of the news process is related directly to the economic structure of news organizations. For example, Michael Schudson has criticised the approach on the grounds that it assumes that "everything in between is a black box that need not be examined" (Schudson 1989: 266). However Golding and Murdock more usefully outline their perspective as a focus on "the interplay between the symbolic and economic dimensions of public communications. It sets out to show how different ways of financing and

organizing cultural production have traceable consequences for the range of discourses and representations in the public domain and for audiences' access to them (Golding and Murdock 1993: 15).

Edward S Herman and Noam Chomsky writing in 'Manufacturing Consent' (1988) offer what they call a 'propaganda model' of the mass media, the view that the media 'serve to mobilize support for the special interests that dominate the state and private activity (Herman and Chomsky 1988: xi). This model does not however address the variations which may exist between different countries, between liberal and authoritarian regimes and political frameworks and changing times. Michael Schudson has criticised this perspective for being so intent on "establishing connections among different key social institutions, political economy generally fails to describe formally what the disconnections are" (Schudson 1993: 147). This point was also made more recently in a study of British media reporting of the conflict in Northern Ireland (Miller 1994). This 'propaganda model' based on the operation of US media could not be applied completely to the British context due to the continued existence of the BBC, a public service broadcasting system which does not rely on public capital or advertising for revenue. The BBC also fosters a consensual 'national identity' in which definitional struggles may be observed. Miller notes that "This does not mean that the media are independent of the state or that they are not vulnerable to use in propaganda campaigns, but it does mean that the media are not simply instruments of the state (Miller 1994: 259).

Others have examined the social organization of news work and actual practices of creating the news product. For example, Molotch and Lester (1974) created a typology of news which "defines news by the way it comes to the awareness of a news organization". This symbolic interactionist approach rejects the 'objectivity assumption' in journalism, that there is indeed a real world to be objective about. For Molotch and Lester, newspapers do not reflect the world 'out there' but 'the practices of those who have the power to determine the experience of others' (Molotch and Lester 1974: 54).

Culturalists argue broadly that regardless of organisation or bureaucratic routines, journalists select news stories based on values which largely accord

with national social and cultural values. The production of news is, to put it simply, perceived as reflecting the impact of cultural and ideological influences on journalists (rather than media ownership or professional routines). In this perspective, the journalist is assumed to operate with relative autonomy and control of the media is regarded as sited "outside of the media" (Curran, cited in Franklin 1997: 45).

There are identifiable overlaps across and within each field of study. However rather than discussing in detail the nuances of competing perspectives, the aim is simply to highlight the range of approaches to news production and draw attention to the well developed perspectives on the news media. The next section identifies some of the central specific findings that run through news production studies and which may usefully inform a study of how the soap opera production process operates.

Some key findings in sociological studies of news

While the vocabulary and theoretical emphases of the models note above differ, they share the insight that news is not 'obvious' and does not self-select and facts are not 'given'. Tuchman et al. argue that news is not a report on a factual world but 'a depletable consumer product that must be made fresh daily' (Tuchman et al. 1978: 179). There have therefore been numerous studies of the news media organization. The media organization, where media is 'made' has been identified as an essential link to the process of mediation by which society, as it were, addresses itself (McQuail 1994: 185). In addition to studying the occupational practices, values and culture of journalists along with the strategies employed by journalists' sources, studies of news and journalists have been concerned with identifying the factors which influence how news content is selected and presented and in whose interests it might serve⁹.

⁹ Underpinning sociological investigations of news is the premise that if events in the world select themselves as newsworthy and journalists simply reflect social reality back to audiences 'questions concerning the selection and production of news become irrelevant' (Epstein 1973):14.

Various studies have highlighted the importance of selection of news practices; journalistic codes of professionalism and newsroom culture; hierarchy; ownership and the operation of sources¹⁰.

Some studies have attempted to identify values in news bulletins and hypothesise about how the values in news bulletins relate in turn to the journalistic culture within which news is produced. The American sociologist Herbert J. Gans (1980) undertook a participant observation study to examine news selection practices in the main sources of American news (evening bulletins for *CBS* and *NBC* and news magazines, *Newsweek* and *Time*). Through a combination of news content analysis and interviews with journalists, he identified two types of values in news reports: topical and enduring values¹¹.

¹⁰ The gate-keeper studies of the early 1950's addressed the question of news selection through the role of 'gatekeepers' (quite literally the people who select or reject incoming news stories from agencies). However such methods to investigate the news selection process now appear naïve and crude in contrast with later attempts to examine 'what news-makers do' with material and the competing roles of internal and external factors in influencing content. The term 'gatekeeper' leaves "information' sociologically untouched" and "minimizes the complexity of newsmaking". Schudson describes how "News items are not simply selected but constructed. The gatekeeper metaphor describes neither this nor the feedback loops in which the agencies that generate information for the press anticipate the criteria of the gatekeepers' in their efforts to get through the gate (Schudson 1993): 142.

¹¹¹ Gans defined 'topical' and 'enduring' values as follows: "Topical values are the opinions expressed about specific actors or activities of the moment, be they a presidential appointee or a new anti-inflation policy (...) Enduring values, on the other hand, are values which can be found in many different types of news stories over a long period of time; often, they affect what events become news, for some are part and parcel of the definition of news. Enduring values are not timeless, and they may change somewhat over the years; moreover, they also help to shape opinions, and many times, opinions are only specifications of enduring values" (Gans 1980): 41.

Gans substantial content analysis revealed that "the news supports the social order of public, business and professional, upper middle-class, middle-aged, and white male sectors of society" (Gans 1980: 61). He then attempted to relate this finding to the journalistic culture within which the news was selected and to examine "the unwritten rules journalists apply" (Gans 1980: 73). In other words, Gans was clear that how news is selected would provide valuable insights to professionally shared values of journalists. However Gans found that simply to blame journalistic bias or professional codes for story patterning did not account for the complexity of the news making process and the strict parameters imposed by the organisation. Journalists were not 'free agents' and rarely made decisions about news content on "overtly ideological grounds" because "(journalists) work within organizations which provide them with only a limited amount of leeway in selection decisions, which is further reduced by their allegiance to professionally shared values" (Gans 1980: 79).

Instead Gans proposes that news is more complex and those outside of the organization play an important role. He described sources and journalists as being involved in a "tug of war" and news as a 'circular' rather than 'linear' process." Although the notion that journalists transmit information from sources to audiences suggests a linear process, in reality the process is circular, complicated further by a large number of feedback loops". (Gans 1980: 81).

The news organization and how news is bureacratically managed

Other work has focused crucially not on the selection process but rather how news items are treated after they have been selected (Galtung and Ruge 1965, Chibnall 1977). Galtung and Ruge examined foreign news in the Norwegian press and identified a series of twelve factors, proposing that the more factors shared by an event, the more likely the event is to be classified as news¹².

¹² Chibnall (1977) identified eight factors: immediacy; dramatization; personalization; simplification; titillation; conventionalism; structured access; novelty (Chibnall 1977).

These included the following (frequency, ambiguous, meaningful, consonant, unexpected, continuity, composition). This study of foreign news in the Norwegian press is worth noting. As Dennis McQuail writes it led to "the first clear statement of the news values (or 'news factors') which would be most influential in deciding whether or not a potential news 'event' would be noticed by the news media" (McQuail 1994: 214).

The selection and presentation of news has been seen to be influenced by symbolic and cultural factors. Frank Pearce (1973) writing about British media coverage of homosexuality adopts Mary Douglas's view that "societies like to keep their cultural concepts clean and neat and are troubled by 'anomalies' that do not fit the pre-conceived categories of the culture. Homosexuality is an anomaly in societies that take as fundamental the opposition and relationship of male and female; thus homosexuals provide a culturally charged topic for storytelling that seeks to preserve or reinforce the conventional moral order of society - and its conceptual or "symbolic foundation". News stories about homosexuals, Pearce says, may be moral tales,

a negative reference point...an occasion to reinforce conventional moral values by telling a moral tale. Through these means tensions in the social system can be dealt with and "conventionalized" (Pearce cited in Schudson 1993: 152).

Edward Jay Epstein (1973) studied three major US network news services (NBC, CBS and ABC) and attempted to examine the influence of the processes of a news organization on the news product. Through a combination of content analysis, participant observation and interviews he argued that news is a product of the decision-making process of the organisation. Despite those working in the industry perceiving news as connected to immediacy, change and unusual events, Gans found that the vast majority of news stories which appeared on the evening news had at least one days forewarning, in order that the technical crew could be dispatched. "Network news thus is shaped and constrained by certain structures imposed from without, such as government regulation of broadcasting and the economic realities of networks; certain uniform procedures for filtering and evaluating information and reaching

decisions ; and certain practices of recruiting newsmen and producers who hold, or accept, values that are consistent with organizational needs, and reject others – all of which are open to analysis (Epstein 1973: 43).

The influence of the news organization was developed by Philip Schlesinger in his rigorous study of how BBC news is produced, 'Putting Reality Together' (1987). Schlesinger identified the minutiae of production routines and the importance of what he termed a 'stop-watch culture'. Although the production routines involved in news making had been discussed elsewhere, Schlesinger's work was important in highlighting 'time' as a crucial concern. In Schlesinger's view "The routines of production have definite consequences in structuring news. To delineate their main features goes some way towards providing a rational understanding of an important form of work. The news we receive on any given day is not as unpredictable as much journalistic mythology would have us believe. Rather, the doings of the world are tamed to meet the needs of a production system in many respects bureaucratically organized (Schlesinger 1987: 47).

Schlesinger also examined the power structures within which BBC journalists worked, the operation of the editorial system and the 'referral' organisation of decision making. Although he could identify clear hierarchical constraints to how specific news items were tackled, this level of control was surprising to the journalists themselves who perceived themselves as working within a relatively autonomous structure. Schlesinger's study was important in delineating two myths of professionalism. Firstly, the 'micro myth' that production staff are autonomous and secondly, the 'macro myth' that the BBC is socially unattached. As Schlesinger writes:

Many newsmen who read earlier drafts of this study expressed surprise at the pervasive nature of the control system depicted here. They did not, in general, consider themselves kept on a short leash, and were unconscious, most of the time, of the highly ramified nature of the editorial system, and its impact on their work. They espouse, as it were, the BBC's micro-myth of independence. This stresses the autonomy of the production staff,

and delegation of responsibility downward from the Director-General. The macro-myth of the BBC's independence, is of course, the view that the BB is largely socially unattached. Together, the two myths support a considerable sense of autonomy (Schlesinger 1987: 137).

Schlesinger's study may provide valuable insights into the role of organisational ethos. In addition to looking for the evident procedures and bureaucratic routines, it is important to also seek the 'invisible' organisational ethos to which production personnel subscribe.

Some academic researchers have argued that bureaucratic routine is actually more important than news values. For example Peter Golding and Philip Elliot (Golding and Elliot 1979) have proposed that news production is a passive rather than active endeavour. Moving beyond a crude 'gate keeper' approach to examining how material is accepted or rejected¹³ they propose instead that:

news production is rarely the active application of decisions of rejection or promotion to highly varied and extensive material. On the contrary, it is for the most part the passive exercise of routine and highly regulated procedures in the task of selecting from already limited supplies of information. News values exist and are, of course, significant. But they are as much the resultant explanation or justification of necessary procedures as their source (Golding and Elliot 1979: 114).

The findings from this cross - cultural study demonstrated that broadcast news emerged with similar form and content across different countries. The division of labour required for news production has been viewed as limiting the impact of the individual on news selection. Indeed Golding concludes that:

analyses which see the news as a product of powerful groups in society, designed to provide a view of the world consonant with

¹³ Dennis McQuail (1994) similarly views the concept of 'gatekeepers' as being of limited value to sociological investigations. He proposes that the term is flawed "in its implication that news arrives in ready made and unproblematic event-story form at the 'gates' of the media, where it is either admitted or excluded (McQuail 1994) 214.

the interests of those groups, simplify the situation too far to be helpful. The occupational routines and beliefs of journalists do not allow a simple conduit between the ruling ideas of the powerful and their distribution via the air - waves. Yet the absence of power and process clearly precludes the development of views which might question the prevailing distribution of power, or its roots in the evolution of economic distribution and control (Golding and Elliot 1979: 210).

The rich debate about news production begs many questions about the production of soap opera and the overlaps and contrasts across these diverse formats. Television soap opera is a very different format, arguably more open, than news, targets different audiences and occupies a very different place in the media. Clearly it would seem impossible to reasonably argue that soap opera story lines are self - evident as the television drama writer has the whole world of imagination to choose from. However the studies of the news do generate some important areas to consider. For example the ways in which wider social and cultural values shape story line development and the role of the audience in this. Another important area would seem to be the role played by commercial imperatives (ownership and control and advertisers). The soap opera production team operates within a larger broadcasting organisation, how does the institutional culture influence the nature of story lines? The role of source organisations has been identified as important to understanding news content as a site of struggle. To what extent might the production team be influenced by those out with their organisation? Finally, television soap operas attract large audiences, to what extent does the 'imagined' audience play an implicit role in developing different story lines? In the following sections, the literature surrounding the television soap opera is addressed.

STUDYING THE SOAP OPERA

Soap operas have captured larger audiences in more countries over a longer time span than any other form of television fiction yet it is well documented that the soap serial has been traditionally trivialised by academics and media

commentators (Allen 1995: 3). Soap serials emerged as a serious field of study principally through the efforts of feminist academics. The following section discusses the dominant tradition in studies of the soap genre. In contrast with news production literature, the focus here has been either how fictional women are represented or how female audiences engage with and enjoy soaps. The examination of soap production processes has largely been neglected and the question of how the soap production process relates to specific substantive content of story lines has been rarely posed.

The feminist tradition in soap opera research

The feminist tradition of research into soap operas has produced a wide body of academic literature ranging in discipline from media and cultural studies to literary studies. In general, however the genre of soap opera has been studied in a markedly different way to news or current affairs television. For example the soap opera has not been examined from a political economy perspective although it is an approach which has been repeatedly used to investigate non-fictional production processes (Brunsdon 1995). In comparison with production studies of the news, the production of non-journalistic content has remained an "underdeveloped and fragmentary field of research" (McQuail 1994: 188).

From the mid-1970's to mid 1980's, the soap opera became the focus of increased academic attention. Much of this attention was triggered by feminist interest in the soap genre. Charlotte Brunsdon recently reflected on feminist interest in the form and describes:

the paradox, that, on the one hand, there is a perceived incompatibility between feminism and soap opera, but, on the other, it is arguably feminist interest that has transformed soap opera into a very fashionable field for academic inquiry (Brunsdon 1995: 50)

Although early investigations focused on gender power within the television industry as a whole and examined the profile of women within drama programming, gender exclusion was not in fact, such a problem within fictional

television as factual programming. Nevertheless the soap opera was studied within wider substantial work which explored the 'fictional' women represented in mass media and women in the 'real world'. Gaye Tuchman identified what she terms 'the symbolic annihilation' of women by the media ¹⁴ (Tuchman et al. 1978). Yet as noted in their influential work on women's visibility in television, the genre of soap opera with its strong presence of female characters was the exception to the rule (Tuchman et al. 1978).

Another direction is what Brunsdon terms 'textual or program studies'. This strand of research originated within English literature or film studies and was inclusive of soap opera in that the focus of attention was on television programmes which addressed or primarily focused upon women. These might therefore include analysis of American sitcoms such as *The Golden Girls*, or the challenging crime series *Cagney and Lacey* and the British equivalent, *Prime Suspect*. Work by Dorothy Hobson on the British soap opera *Crossroads* (Hobson 1982), Ien Ang on American prime time series *Dallas* (Ang 1985) and Tania Modleski on mass-produced women's fiction (Modleski 1982) were crucial to the advancement of a feminist tradition. A resurgent interest in audiences readings of television forms resulted in the 1980's in a plethora of studies exploring how women read soap opera texts (for discussion see Brown 1990). The next part of this chapter briefly outlines the influential studies which have developed work in this area.

Key studies in gender and genre research

There is a substantial body of research which explores female audiences identification with soap operas. Much of this work suggests that the soap genre positions female viewers differently to other more 'closed' or 'male' texts. The work of American writer Tania Modleski was very influential in this respect (Modleski 1982). Modleski addressed soap operas alongside other forms of 'women's fiction' such as the romance novel, in her dissertation and book

¹⁴ This is not to suggest that Tuchman et. al. assume a crude direct correlation between women on screen, their lived experience and economic positioning (Tuchman et al. 1978).

'Loving with a Vengeance' (1982). She proposed two, arguably conflicting, analyses of soap operas and their female audiences. Firstly suggesting that soaps appear to contribute to women's perpetual repression, constituting the female viewer as 'a sort of ideal mother', convincing women that their highest goal is to see their families united and happy, while consoling them for their inability to achieve this ideal (Modleski 1982). Secondly, proposing that the formal structures of soap genre (for example, the open ended, multi climaxed soap narrative), mimic female sexuality and are in opposition to the dominant masculine narrative form (which focuses on action with minimum dialogue). In this sense Modleski identified the form of soap opera as affording female audiences significant pleasures. Consequently she implores feminist artists to "look for clues to women's pleasure which are already present in existing forms, even if this pleasure is currently placed at the service of patriarchy" (Modleski 1982: 104). In Modleski's view, attempts by feminists to construct more progressive feminist texts deny the possibilities and pleasures provided by existing popular forms. Modleski's analysis is problematic in several ways (not least her essentialist take on female sexuality and narrative structure, for critiques see Gripsrud 1995 and Geraghty 1991). However Modleski's work on soap operas was highly influential and although her approach was textual rather than ethnographic Modleski nonetheless highlighted the importance of understanding soap operas within the contexts of their reception and use (Allen 1995: 7).

In the early 1980's the television soap became subject to more serious study in the British context. The popular soap opera *Coronation Street* was studied from Marxist and Feminist perspectives, by Richard Dyer, Terry Lovell and Christine Geraghty (Dyer et al. 1981). Their main concern with *Coronation Street* was how British working class life was constituted within the popular serial. Geraghty later compared social class in British and American soaps (Geraghty 1991). These authors made connections between the fictional world of the soap and other culturally important studies of working class culture such as Richard Hoggart's influential work "The Uses of Literacy" (Hoggart 1959). Echoing Modleski's concern, Terry Lovell in her essay on *Coronation Street* and 'ideology', explored how the soap narrative positions women. Lovell's analysis

proposed that although soaps might appear to reproduce the subordination of women socially (with their emphasis on the domestic sphere of home and family), the soap opera could in fact be viewed as a progressive text. In support of this Lovell cites the prominence of the independent strong matriarch at the heart of the soap narrative. She also points to the ways in which the genre conventions of the soap operate differently from other media forms as evidence that soaps may actually subvert the values of patriarchal power relations. Lovell describes the soap form as follows:

The conventions of the genre are such that the normal order of things...is precisely that of broken marriages, temporary liaisons, availability for 'lasting' romantic love which in fact never lasts. This order, the reverse of the patriarchal norm, is in a sense interrupted by the marriages and 'happy family' interludes, rather than vice – versa (Lovell 1981):50.

In other words, Lovell argues that the formal features of soap opera (seriality and non closure) favour independence on the part of the characters. For Lovell, narrative closure usually involves the implication of permanent relationships and therefore the return to a patriarchal order. For further discussion of this point see Palmer 1991: 163.

Around the same time, feminist academic, Ien Ang's work on the American prime-time serial *Dallas* was published in Dutch (1982), making a significant contribution to the field of gender/genre research. In her book 'Watching 'Dallas'' Ang conducts textual analysis of 42 letters from fans, who responded to her advert in a Dutch magazine. Although Ang did not engage with audiences directly she again was interested in how (mainly female) viewers perceived their identification with the programme. Ang was initially surprised that so many women ascribed the concept of 'realism' and 'relevance to daily life' as important factors in their viewing experience. This was especially unexpected given that *Dallas* was a particularly sensationalist fictional programme, so culturally and economically removed from the everyday experiences of the predominantly female Dutch letter writers. However she proposed that while *Dallas* might not provide female audiences with formally defined 'realism', they

found instead an 'emotional realism', the emphasis in the show was after all on 'family tragedy'. In Ang's view then, the exaggerated plots and overblown characters rather than alienating female viewers, allowed a heightened emotional tension and afforded viewer – text connections based not on strict definitions of realism but rather on emotional resonance with the material. Ang proposes that what she termed 'the tragic structure of feeling' particularly works for female audiences who are emotionally equipped to project a 'melodramatic imagination' onto their viewing experience (Ang 1985). This work again re-emphasised the 'gendered' nature of soaps appeal and stressed the cultural competencies and skills of women in reading soap opera¹⁵.

The relationship between 'real' women and soap was investigated by Dorothy Hobson who carried out the first British ethnographic study of a soap opera and female audiences 'Crossroads: The Drama of a Soap Opera' (1982). Identifying herself as a 'fan' of the soap Hobson spent time with women as they watched the programme in their own home and observed the domestic context of reception. For example, how women managed to incorporate their viewing experience into a busy home life, preparing meals and caring for children while the soap played in the background. Hobson identified the programme as the source of great pleasure particularly in combating the isolated existence of some of her research participants - women eagerly anticipated the next episode and endlessly discussed the merits of characters. However she concluded that soap opera did not simply provide escapism for these women. As she explains:

(Soaps) are precisely a way of understanding and coping with problems which are recognised as 'shared' by other women, both in the programme and in 'real life'. Differences in class or material possessions seem to be transcended in the realization that there are problems in everyday life which are common to all women and their families (Hobson 1982: 131).

¹⁵ Charlotte Brunson deviates importantly from proposing that women viewers are 'naturally' equipped with feminine skills to read soap serials but instead prefers to relate these competencies to "present cultural and political arrangements"(Brunson 1981): 36.

For Hobson, the appeal of *Crossroads* lay in the opportunity for different female viewers (from the young single mother to the elderly widow) to respond in diverse ways to the 'emotional realism' of plot lines, characters and issues and to witness everyday life situated in a social and domestic context. Her work was important largely because it presented a move away from text based analyses and foregrounded the production of meanings and pleasures by viewers. She argues that the meaning of texts cannot be simply 'read off' by the academic researcher in isolation but are embedded in the social context of viewing. Indeed Hobson celebrates the female viewing process as follows:

It seems that the myth of the passive viewer is about to be shattered. They do not sit there watching and taking it all in without any mental activity or creativity. It seems that they expect to contribute to the production which they are watching and bring their own knowledge to augment the text (Hobson 1982: 136).

However Hobson goes much further than simply proposing that soap viewers are not cultural dupes, arguing that the soap genre is progressive because the open - ended soap serial offers limitless creativity for viewers. In her concluding statement she explains that the diversity of readings is such that:

To try to say what *Crossroads* means to its audience is impossible for there are as many different *Crossroads* as there are viewers. Tonight twelve million, tomorrow thirteen million; with thirteen million possible understandings of the programme (Hobson 1982: 136).

This is an important conclusion to draw and one which will be explored further in the audience reception case study of *Brookside*.

The analyses of soap opera outlined above all to a greater or lesser degree foreground the relationship between soaps narrative structure and their (assumed female) audiences. Feminists must be credited with rescuing the genre and female audiences from academic oblivion but these studies of soap opera do not shed much light on the substantive nature of soap story lines. Nor

do studies of this kind engage with how audiences interpret the substantive information in story lines (rather than identify with characters). How soap operas are made and the decision making processes in which soap production personnel engage, are absent from the dominant research model of research into the soap opera.

The Production Context of Soap Opera

As has been discussed above, in comparison with textual analyses of soaps and their audiences, the production context within which soap operas are produced has been neglected. There have for example been few studies which have attempted to locate specific story line content to wider economic concerns such as the struggle over ratings. Nor have there been attempts to distinguish between specific substantive topics to examine the conditions under which the production process may be challenged. In short, soap opera studies have been marked by their lack of attention to the inter-relatedness of production and content. The following section identifies some studies which have addressed the production context of television soap opera.

Richard Dyer stressed the importance of locating media texts within their production context in his paper on the soap opera *Coronation Street* (Dyer et al. 1981). In particular Dyer highlights the constraints of technology and 'time'¹⁶. Dyer emphasises the organisational constraints of the programme. *Coronation Street* is situated firmly within its institutional context (as a commercially produced product operating under the broadcasting legislation and ethos of Granada Television). Dyer details the routinised nature of story line development - the timing of story conferences, the personnel involved at each stage of script development and the routines of the production organisation (making actors and sets available). Routines must occur to deadline if the show is to be produced. Dyer thus identifies a series of what he calls 'significant constraints' which bind the programme. These include the following:

¹⁶ In this sense Dyer echoes the organisational approaches taken to sociology of news production.

place use (limited sets and the restricted narrative possibilities in a 'street'), camera strategy within the spaces used (the conventional shot strategy in the Rover's Return for instance), a need to maintain the mythic realism of life in a northern street (Dyer et al. 1981: 62).

However in comparison with the kind of detailed work undertaken on news, Dyer's account of the production process is one which seems to neglect the dynamic nature of production. Despite highlighting important areas of constraint however Dyer offers a curiously flat rendering of the production process. As he presents it here there is little which is dynamic or changing in the production context. Reliant on mostly secondary sources Dyer's work can be seen as helpful in identifying the basic conditions within which each programme episode is developed. A significant omission is surely that Dyer does not engage with the production personnel engaged in making the soap. Indeed this is precisely the sort of work I hope to develop later in my case studies.

As noted earlier, Dorothy Hobson focuses mainly on womens' reception of *Crossroads* however she had originally intended to examine how the production process of specific episodes or programmes linked with audience reception (Hobson 1982). This, in her view was simply not possible because, as she states here:

Although I have gone out to watch specific episodes and to talk about those episodes, the viewers have quickly moved the conversation to the programme in general and talked about other episodes through the medium of the storylines (Hobson 1982: 107).

This may of course simply be an important finding about how audiences view soaps (viewers 'make sense of' specific episodes not in isolation but through their prior knowledge of the programme and will bring this 'soap history' to each viewing experience). However, Hobsons' production interviews do successfully set the scene and delineate some of the important features of *Crossroads*. For example, she interviews the Producer about his personal vision of the show and

his commitment to the audience against a backdrop of press criticism and sniping in which *Crossroads* was positioned as 'the most maligned programme on British television' (Hobson 1982: 36). The commitment of the production office to their audience was such that the fictional world of *Crossroads* was maintained, even to viewers who would sometimes call the production office and attempt to book rooms at the motel. Hobson is however less concerned with how television soap opera is made than with questions of audience identification and popularity. As she explains:

Soap operas have become part of contemporary popular culture, and what we should be asking is, 'Why does the series warrant such support from its audience and remain so popular?' (Hobson 1982: 25).

This is a question which has been posed in relation to another television soap, *EastEnders*. David Buckingham's research on the BBC soap opera is a valuable attempt to engage with the inter-relatedness of production, content and reception of soap operas (Buckingham 1987). The central focus for Buckingham's work (thus echoing Hobson's main inquiry) seeks to explain the 'popularity' of *EastEnders*. The *EastEnders* audience is at the centre of his investigation. For example, his research questions focus on how the audience was conceived of by the creators, how audiences are positioned within the text and how 'real' audiences identify with the programme¹⁷.

¹⁷ Perhaps the most striking difference between the production of news and production of soap opera lies in the relationship between media personnel and their audiences. Michael Schudson commented on the lack of attention paid to audiences in sociological news studies:

the 'audience' or the 'public' has a kind of phantom existence that the sociological study of news production has yet to consider in its theoretical formulations (Schudson 1993): 156. This may however simply reflect the occupational culture within which news was produced. Journalists have been seen to have little knowledge or indeed interest in their audiences. A point made by Philip Schlesinger who identified the 'missing link' between the newsmakers and their audience. Schlesinger found that the audience research which was made available to BBC journalists was 'sporadic'. Production personnel had vague ideas about their audiences based on personal interactions or assumptions about who might watch which channels, however in the end this did not appear to be a serious concern. As Schlesinger concludes "The gap between producer and consumer does not pose severe problems because it is filled with the conventional wisdom of a professionalism which is largely self-sustaining. (...) Ultimately the newsman is his own audience. When he talks of his professionalism he is saying that he knows how to tell his own

Buckingham is therefore firstly concerned with positioning the programme in its institutional and production context, exploring in detail how *EastEnders* was developed at a particular time and the production philosophies which underlined programme development. His production study therefore outlines the perceptions of the *EastEnders* audience by the creators of *EastEnders* and senior members of the Channel hierarchy. As Buckingham notes here, images and assumptions of 'the audience' is implicit at every stage in developing a television soap:

Every decision – from killing off a character to selecting their wardrobe – entails making assumptions about viewers and the potentially diverse ways in which they may respond. As far as programme-makers are concerned, these assumptions are likely to be intuitive, rather than explicit; and the process of debate and negotiation which surrounds such decisions is one in which many of these assumptions are constantly being tested and redefined (Buckingham 1987: 35).

However Buckingham does not seek to unpack these assumptions. Nor does he address and account for the "process of debate and negotiation" which in his view surrounds soap production decision making. This would seem an important area for discussion and further investigation. Buckingham does however provide a valuable model for studying the soap opera. In addition to exploring how senior broadcast management envisage their audience, Buckingham conducted some audience research with *EastEnders* viewers. His sample comprises 60 young people (aged between seven and eighteen) in the London area during 1986. Buckingham held entirely open - ended discussions, asking only initial questions about the participants viewing habits and to identify their favourite and least favourite character. In this sense the audience study is designed principally to explore audiences identification with the programme

story" (Schlesinger 1987): 134. Philip Elliot came to a similar conclusion in his study of a documentary series produced for the Independent Television Authority. Elliot concluded that the opinions of colleagues in the television world can be more important than considerations of the audience 'out there'. (Elliot 1972). More contemporary studies of news media production might produce different findings as news media is arguably becoming more audience led.

rather than tap into the kind of impact that different story lines may have had on the school students. Buckingham discusses how the young people related to different aspects of the programme. He highlights teenage women's identification with strong female working class characters and young men's love of 'bad boy' Den Watts, their rejection of teenage characters such as Michelle Fowler, their hatred of middle-class characters and overall apparent indifference to race and black characterisations in the soap (Buckingham 1987): 154-201. Within these sessions research participants do raise how the soap highlighted social problems:

Sheila (17) I think it's aired quite a lot of good things. Like the cot death, I think that was really good, the way they handled that. Things like that should be brought out into the open, 'cause people do experience them, and they sort of hide away, and shut themselves out.

Calista Seeing it happen to somebody else on television that they know, it's really good (Buckingham 1987: 179).

However Buckingham does not unpack these responses to specific story lines. His interest lies in accounting for the 'popularity' of the soap rather than the interpretation of soap opera content. This is an important area of neglect particularly because television soap operas may have a particular influence and reach for young people. It is also particularly remiss given that *EastEnders* exemplifies the distinctive British tradition of making soaps in which social issues are aired, considered by academic studies of American television drama assumed to involve an unusual level of 'risk taking' on the part of British production staff.

The lack of risk taking in television soap operas is a point which has reverberated throughout most of the writing on American soaps and been seen to characterise the production processes¹⁸. It is instructive to examine the

¹⁸ Finally, the relations between pressure or lobbying groups and soap productions are rarely discussed in relation to much of the traditional discussion around British soap opera production

conclusions of two studies of fictional television production, one which examined decision making by production staff on the day time soap opera *Guiding Light* and another which highlighted production influences on prime time drama series, *Dynasty*. Both studies concluded that advertisers play an overt role in shaping soap opera content (Intintoli 1984; Gripsrud 1995). Indeed Intintoli's observation of the production world of *Guiding Light* concluded that the over riding concern of production staff was to avoid "controversial issues that would split the audience" (Intintoli 1984). As he explains:

Risk is minimized by avoiding offensive stories, scenes, and language, which limits the stories told and how they are told. The requirements of a serial format, the generation of a continuous stream of potential experience, and the pursuit of ratings, combined with reducing uncertainty and minimizing risk severely restrict story-telling on soaps (Intintoli 1984: 230).

The Norwegian sociologist Jostein Gripsrud addressed production within his broad study of Norwegian reception of *Dynasty*. He was concerned with the impact that importing an American soap (viewed as symbolising the worst excesses of American culture) made on the Norwegian public service broadcasting channel (Gripsrud 1995). Gripsrud provides a useful perspective on the reception of soap operas in countries other than Britain or America. The main point for Gripsrud was to show how it was possible for a Hollywood television serial to become both a sign of a historical shift in broadcasting and cultural traditions and also an instrument for such change. Indeed Gripsrud argues that Norwegian culture was changed by *Dynasty*. As he noted:

The *Dynasty* experience may be said to have brought about change, on the one hand, in the way Norwegians relate to television and, to some extent, popular culture in general, and on

although there has been some attention to this in the American context of prime time television (Gitlin 1991); (Montgomery 1989); (Turow 1989). Such collaborations are if not increasing, certainly becoming more visible through associated media coverage

the other hand, in the way the public service broadcasting institution conceives of, and tries to fulfil its functions in a new media environment (Gripsrud 1995: 72).

His comprehensive account of the cultural debates which surrounded the importing of an American cultural product to a European country is related to wider debates about the internationalization of culture and the increasing commercialization of the media and competition for audiences. In addition, he cites the changing relations between high and low/ popular culture and what he describes as the 'relative weakening of the traditions and institutions of popular enlightenment, both in broadcasting and in the public sphere in general' (Gripsrud 1995:17-18).

Gripsrud highlights the perspectives and interplay of the *Dynasty* production team (from the producers and directors to writers and actors) and builds a picture of the production world which they inhabit. Many of his observations are specific to the American structure of production. For example, the importance of an alliance between Aaron Spelling and Esther and Richard Shapiro, powerful players in the American prime time serial industry. However the production context of American television fiction is quite different to the British context. The role of advertisers is a central consideration for American television with serious consequences for the programme direction. In Gripsruds' view, the power of the advertisers not only has consequences for the kinds of stories which the programme will air but also for the 'look' and even structure of the show. As Gripsrud has written:

This has of course profoundly influenced the aesthetics of American television drama, from the structure of its stories (such as their adjustment to the rhythms of commercial breaks) to the looks of its actors (most shows dominated by actors looking as if they normally worked in commercials for cosmetics). The strict, commercially motivated formulas and schedules regulating drama production for network TV leave, it seems, extremely little room for personal, creative or ideologically deviant manoeuvres by the industry's personnel. US television drama is the epitome of

commercial cultural production (Gripsrud 1995: 28).

The subject of Gripsruds' study, *Dynasty* is not strictly a soap opera and is produced under very different conditions to British soap operas however the role played by commercial imperatives may be very important, particularly for the British soap operas which are produced for commercial television.

A note on text and audience

The move away from strict textual analysis to more ethnographic research which has been seen to characterise the dominant tradition in soap opera literature was not confined simply to work on soaps or just on female audiences. Such work discussed above partly arose out of a new movement within media/cultural studies in response to the dominant tradition in critical media studies in the 1970's in which texts were subject to deep analysis. Empirical studies therefore were designed to 'rescue' audiences from their ideologically inscribed positions proposed by film theorists and the work of academics such as Colin McCabe and Laura Mulvey which dominated critical media studies in Britain in the 1970's¹⁹ (MacCabe 1974; Mulvey 1975). This development can be traced to work at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies led by Stuart Hall. In Hall's influential essay 'Encoding and Decoding the TV Message' (1973) he stressed the need to take into account that audiences are social subjects, bringing diverse experiences to their encounter with media texts. Audiences may not then necessarily take up the subject positions ascribed to them by the academic theorist but may negotiate or even resist them. Hall's theory of 'dominant' 'negotiated' and 'oppositional' readings of a text generated a wave of ethnographic studies. David Morley's research study 'The 'Nationwide' Audience' (Morley 1980) applied Hall's theoretical framework to a study of the television programme 'Nationwide'²⁰ and stressed the class

¹⁹ The work of Screen theorists has been critiqued usefully elsewhere (see (Moore 1993) or (Eldridge et al. 1997).

²⁰ It is interesting that Hall reflected some years later on this work and how it was then empirically 'tested' as it were by Morley. Hall explains the context here: " The encoding/decoding model wasn't a grand model (...) I didn't think of it as generating a model

dimensions of understanding media texts. Indeed it is widely recognised that much of the soap studies of audiences owe at least some debt to Morley's work. The points raised by this development in audience research will be discussed later however it is worth positioning the thesis study within critical media studies²¹.

John Corner in his review of audience research studies (Corner 1991) usefully groups many of the recent audience reception studies into two distinct projects. Firstly research which is concerned with the media and 'definitional power', the 'public knowledge' project and secondly, the 'popular culture' project work concerned more with taste and pleasure. Although Corner acknowledges that the two projects do have interconnections, the research which has been conducted is distinct both in emphasis and genre. Thus studies which might fall into the category of 'public knowledge' have tended to take news and current affairs as their focus whereas the investigation of media as a source of entertainment and pleasure has focused on popular television forms (Corner 1991). The emphasis of 'the public knowledge' project studies has been to link media content to public belief. In other words, to investigate the power of the media to shape public attitudes and beliefs about specific topics, events and public issues. Studies conducted by members of the Glasgow Media Group, include the influence of media reporting on audiences beliefs about conflict such as the Miners' Strike (Philo 1990) or the conflict in Northern Ireland (Miller

which would last for the next twenty –five years for research. (...) It suggests an approach; it opens up new questions. It maps the terrain. But it's a model which has to be worked with and developed and changed". He also is clear on where the 'power' lies in this model as he understood it "(...) the slippage between preferred meaning and preferred reading is what does the damage. Because preferred reading appears to put it on the decoding side, whereas preferred meaning is on the encoding side, not the decoding side. Why is it there? Well, it is there because I don't want a model of a circuit which has no power in it. I don't want a model which is determinist, but I don't want a model without determination. And therefore I don't think audiences are in the same positions of power with those who signify the world to them. And preferred reading is simply a way of saying if you have control of the apparatus of signifying the world, if you're in control of the media, you own it, you write the texts-to some extent it has a determining shape". (1994)

²¹ For a history of debates surrounding media effects and the current state of audience reception research see (Eldridge et al. 1997).

1994). Other research has addressed health/social problems such as AIDS and child sexual abuse (Miller et al. 1998; Kitzinger and Skidmore 1995a). This type of work has explicitly challenged 'active audience' theory which has come to dominate cultural and media studies in which it is not the power of the media which is studied but rather the power of the audience (see (Fiske 1987; Ang and Hermes 1991). Rather than seeing 'active' audiences as opening up new ways of conceptualising audiences as consumers, it has been argued instead that the emphasis on audiences ability to resist media messages has 'closed down' areas of investigation. As Eldridge et al, (1997) argue:

This is an orthodoxy which dismisses questions of media power by focusing on audience activity and interpretative capabilities. It is an orthodoxy, which revises old ideas about the media's power to convey ideology-sometimes it revises them out of existence. This orthodoxy sometimes known as the 'new revisionism' (because of the way it revises old ideas about power and ideology) is dangerous. It is certainly misleading to assume, as some 'new revisionist' authors seem to, that pleasure is inherently revolutionary and 'oppositional' readings can be equated with 'liberation' in the real world (Eldridge et al. 1997: 156).

These are very important debates within the field of media and cultural studies and which will be returned to later and discussed in light of my research study.

CONCLUSIONS

The literature which surrounds how news is constructed is well developed in comparison with academic attention on the soap opera. The dominant literature which surrounds the television soap has centred upon the meanings and pleasures of the genre and the tendency has been to position soap opera as a feminine genre for an assumed 'female' audience. Key work in the field has consequently made the concerns of 'gendered spectatorship' a primary focus (Ang 1985; Hobson 1982; Modleski 1982). Despite some attention to the ways in which new British soaps sought different audiences and developed a tradition of socially realistic drama there has been no significant attempt to explore the

processes which lie behind soap opera production. As a consequence there has been little work which addresses the social power of soap content nor the organisational structures and pressures under which programme-makers operate. In addition to this, where the context and dynamics of soap production has been analysed, these have tended to include the perspectives only of 'those at the top' of the hierarchy (Buckingham 1987).

Although there is a significant body of literature which addresses how media audiences have been positioned and what effects, if any, different media messages may have. These matters have been of concern in the social sciences, media and cultural studies for a number of years. Consequently there are a number of retrospective analyses which have traced how audiences have been conceptualised and studied and the different models, theories and vocabularies which have developed to explore questions of media impact. Questions of 'what do the media do to people?' have it has been argued, been all but replaced by 'what do people do with the media?' The research which is presented in the following chapters has been developed and conducted to build upon and develop the soap opera literature and the 'public knowledge' project in several ways.

First, it is important to re-positioning the production context of story line development within soap opera literature. Previous work has addressed the ways in which some soap producers may seek to attract and engage audiences (Hobson 1982; Buckingham 1987). This research could be developed by examining the production priorities which influence how specific story lines are developed. Second, the soap production process may be usefully investigated and analysed in ways which have been more traditionally associated with the production processes around news organisations (e.g. the influence of ownership, the role of hierarchy, how external influences such as source organisations lobby for access). Another area to explore is the specific content and messages of the soap story line and how audiences interpret these. The research has therefore been designed to contribute to the 'public knowledge' project, as defined by Corner (1991) by exploring how audiences respond to

information in the format of soap, traditionally studied only as a site of entertainment and pleasure.

The next chapter discusses the rationale and methodology for the research study, how the substantive areas were selected, the conduct of the production interviews and the audience reception study.

Chapter three: The Research Design and Methodology

INTRODUCTION

This chapter outlines the rationale for the overall study design and the methods used to investigate the main research question: What are the production factors which influence how social issue story lines are developed in television soap opera? This chapter therefore addresses how the substantive topics were selected, why diverse soap productions were included and how the production interviews were conducted (the production personnel interviewees and interviews with source organisations). It also outlines the methods used in the complementary investigation into producing television programmes about one of the substantive topics (mental distress) in other non-news television formats (the documentary, single series and medical drama). The final section introduces the research methodology adopted to explore how audiences respond to social issue story lines in soap opera (the case study of audiences responses to sexual violence in the Channel Four soap opera, *Brookside*).

RESEARCH DESIGN AROUND DIVERSE SOAPS AND

ISSUES

The research model adopted to investigate the production processes of non-news television, has been adapted and developed from different production studies. The findings of studies conducted into news media have provided valuable insights to approaching the area of soap opera production and have guided me to the research questions to be discussed and appropriate methodologies for the study of soap opera production personnel.

Rather than attempting to conduct a comparative study of the soap opera 'organisation' (as for example Philip Schlesinger did with the BBC news organisation (Schlesinger 1987) the aim was to design a study which would firstly explore programme diversity. This was to allow comparisons to be made across different soap operas (e.g. the 'issue based' soap *Brookside* and the

'entertainment' soap, *Coronation Street*). Very few studies of soap opera had addressed the production context of television soap opera. Those few studies which were concerned with soap opera production also confined their investigation to a single programme (e.g. studying production factors around the American prime time series *Dynasty* (Gripsrud 1995) or American day - time soap opera *Guiding Light* (Intintoli 1984). In the British context, particularly, there had been no significant attempt to examine how story lines were produced, although David Buckingham addressed how audiences were perceived by *EastEnders* creators and senior BBC broadcasting management (Buckingham 1987). Similarly, Dorothy Hobsons' work on *Crossroads*, included interviews with production team members on the programme specifically in relation to their vision of programme direction and audience (Hobson 1982). Neither Hobson, nor Buckingham attempted to investigate the influences of the production philosophies on how specific story lines were developed and the different factors that shaped the eventual product. The aim was to build upon this previous work by exploring how different soaps produced story lines related to the same substantive topic. Secondly, the study was structured to explore topic diversity. By selecting three main substantive areas (breast cancer, sexual violence and mental distress) and addressing how these areas were treated across different soaps the aim was to investigate the extent to which the production process remained fixed or static (within and across different soaps). Topic diversity would also enable me to articulate the ways in which the nature of the story line topic may influence the production process. Thirdly, I addressed the production possibilities and constraints involved in producing one of my substantive topics (mental distress) in other (non news) television formats. This was to be a limited production study involving different television production personnel but all producing television products in the same area. Other work had provided valuable data on television Producers (Tunstall 1993). However this study of different television production personnel was designed simply as a point of comparison to my main study of television soaps and to examine the importance of the substantive topic. Finally, how audiences respond to social issue story lines in television soap opera was explored in a case study of *Brookside's* sexual violence story line. Other valuable research had been

conducted into how women view television and film portrayals of violence and had highlighted personal experience as an important factor in responses (Schlesinger et al. 1992). The audience study was structured to include those with personal experience of sexual violence and contrasted their responses with other groups who had no obvious experience of the issue. Although there have been many studies of soap opera audiences, as noted above, the central research question has tended to focus on audiences pleasures and identification (Hobson 1982, Buckingham 1987). My audience study was designed to build upon these reception models and as with the production study, the audience research was focused upon a specific issue (sexual violence) rather than studying why soaps are popular or how audiences engage with the soap genre per se.

Finally, this study builds upon other research carried out into the nature and influence of television. Indeed the research model which analyses the motivations of media production personnel (and their sources) as well as media content and audience interpretations has been used to explore different social, health or political issues (Miller et al. 1998, Kitzinger and Skidmore 1995a, Miller 1994). Underpinning these investigations is Stuart Hall's central theoretical point that "the communicative process had to be taken as a whole - with the moment of programme making at one end and the moment of audience perception at the other" (Moore 1993: 16). Consequently the media researcher should not make assumptions about media influence nor indeed the processes of media production based simply on analysis of media content alone.

The sections which follow outline how and why the empirical data was collected. First, I explain the motivations for selecting the substantive areas and which form the central case studies.

The substantive research topics in their socio-cultural context

The topics of child sexual abuse, breast cancer and mental illness were selected as case studies. These issues are located very differently within the British socio-cultural and political context. All are potentially sensitive, involving personal pain and sometimes taboos. However, there are key differences. For

example, mental distress is a topic which has traditionally formed the basis of jokes and comedy across all media formats - particularly so with acute conditions such as schizophrenia (Philo 1996a). This is in marked contrast to breast cancer, an arguably 'high status' disease which is treated with reverence rather than humour by media personnel (Kitzinger and Henderson 2000). Child sexual abuse was recently subjected to satirical coverage (Channel Four, *Brass Eye*, July 2001) and this caused an absolute furore for the Channel - the topic of paedophilia being seen as falling out with the bounds of taste and decency. A number of celebrities were duped into taking part in the spoof documentary. The singer Phil Collins said "I think the presenters of this programme have some serious taste problems when it comes to picking subjects for parody. I did this in good faith for the public benefit, but unfortunately this will probably affect the willingness of many celebrities to support public-spirited causes in the future and it's not difficult to see why" (Bowers 2001: 54). In fact the episode was described as the most controversial television programme "in living memory" (BBC2 Newsnight Review, 21 December 2001)²².

The relationship between those who lobby around the substantive topics and the British media is also significantly different. Public awareness of the disease, breast cancer and the social problem, child sexual abuse has increased dramatically over the past ten years and this has been attributed to media coverage of the issues. Breast cancer now has a media profile which far outweighs its epidemiology (lung cancer and heart disease affect more people yet receive far less media attention). The lobbying around breast cancer and its prominence in Government health policy is a story of success for the PR operations which have nurtured relationships between journalists and other media personnel on behalf of different research and charity organisations (Henderson and Kitzinger 1999). Child sexual abuse has similarly been brought

²² Despite being the 'most complained about programme' of 2001, with 922 people lodging complaints with the Independent Television Commission, 1.5 million viewers watched the repeated programme on C4 13 May 2002. This is 200,000 more viewers than watched the original (Standard Reporter, 2002).

to prominence largely by media reporting although there has been some concern that the high profile of the problem could not be sustained, particularly in news media, where saturation point had been reached (Kitzinger and Skidmore 1995b). By contrast, those working in the field of mental health have spoken of the difficulties in attracting 'positive' media attention. Media reporting, particularly of events involving those with acute mental health conditions such as schizophrenia for example, have been characterised by tendencies to use negative language and to fuel misconceptions about those with mental health problems as violent and unpredictable. Challenging media reporting has therefore been a central function of the organisations working in the field of mental health (Philo 1996a).

It is important to note these differences because soap production personnel do not operate within a social and cultural vacuum and nor do their audiences. By examining these three diverse substantive areas (but all in the field of social/health) allows me to explore the possibilities (and limits) of the soap genre within and across different productions.

Main questions to be discussed

The case study material was therefore selected on the basis of several criteria which shaped the interview schedules. First, I was exploring topics that might be expected to pose a particular challenge for the soap opera format in terms of audiences. (such as child sexual abuse and sexual violence). Secondly, the topic should pose a challenge to the formal structures of soap opera. For example, does the transmission of 'adult' material before the 9pm Watershed in Britain pose a particular challenge to production teams relationship with the organisational hierarchy and with regulatory bodies? Thirdly, if portrayed within news media formats the topic would require detailed research from outside sources. The aim here was to investigate whether this is the case with soap opera treatments of the same issue. Do the same rules apply or does the genre allow soap production personnel less commitment to realism? This finally would enable me to explore the relationship between producers of fiction and their sources.

In order to address the potential impact of such story lines on British audiences and explore the wider cultural implications for the role of soap opera in mapping and influencing social change I draw on broad thematic content analysis of central story lines. To explore whether or not the soap opera is subject to wider social forces the study was expanded to examine the uses and role of source organisations. The aim was to include the perspectives of charities, pressure groups or medical consultants and examine their role in developing story lines and the relationship between these sources and television production personnel (do soap opera personnel draw on wider sources in connection with developing certain story lines?).

Finally, I wanted to explore the potential for soap operas to challenge and influence public perceptions of issues by drawing upon audience reception work.

By exploring audiences responses and interpretations of sexual violence in *Brookside* my aim here was to analyse how a soap opera with explicitly 'issue led' agenda might 'frame' sexual violence and the consequences of this for different audiences.

Additional material was gathered from within the industry itself to examine audience impact (for example, reports of telephone help lines which were run after the programme transmission). In these ways I aim to present an analysis of the role of the British soap opera and analyse the possibilities of the soap as a force for cultural and social change.

THE EMPIRICAL DATA

The thesis study is primarily based on interviews with media production personnel and complemented by interviews with those they consulted (or who lobbied around) controversial story lines. I also interviewed people with a role in monitoring public response. A total of 64 interviews were conducted (see Appendix 1, tables 1 - 5. for interviewee details). In addition to these interviews 69 people were recruited to take part in a series of focus group discussions about *Brookside's* story line of sexual violence. A total of 12 focus group

sessions were run with different groups. Some research participants had direct personal or professional experience of sexual violence (Appendix 2, table 6) others had no identifiable prior knowledge about the topic (Appendix 2, table 7). Additional contextual information was gathered via telephone help line reports (for example from Broadcasting Support Services). Different newspapers were monitored throughout the study period for any references made to soap opera controversies or complaints (primarily drawn from *The Sun*, *The Daily Mirror*, *The Guardian*, *The Observer*, *The Sunday Times*). Potentially relevant soap opera story lines were identified from newspaper reports or from television listings magazines (*TV Times*), there were at that time far fewer publications which profiled forthcoming soap story lines. The next section addresses how I examined the content of these story lines.

Each of the relevant soap opera episodes (on breast cancer, child sexual abuse/sexual violence, mental distress) were tape recorded, watched and analysed. It was important to do this for a number of reasons. Firstly, although I do not present a detailed content analysis study of these story lines in this thesis it was crucial that I was able to address the broad themes and key explanatory framework within which the stories were presented 'on screen'. For example how the key moments in the narrative structure were developed, narrative pace (the use of cliff - hangers) and the characterisation of central roles such as the abuser or breast cancer survivor. In this way it was possible to explore the relationship between the intentions of the production team and the nature of representation. Secondly, it was important simply for practical reasons of identifying my interviewees and developing an informed, programme specific interview schedule. I therefore noted the details of key production personnel involved in developing the story lines from the closing programme credits (this would probably be possible now simply by logging onto the relevant web site but when the study began the internet was not so well developed). This initial analysis was used to develop an interview schedule and to enabled me to discuss story line content in detail with my interviewees (particular sections of dialogue for example). Thirdly, having an on site archive of the story line content meant that I was able to trace back any moments identified as important by

those in the audience study (for example re-watching the episode while analysing their scripts).

I have included more detailed synopses of the two breast cancer story lines which were included as case studies. This allows us to see how social issue story lines may develop over one week, *Brookside* and over a period of many months, *EastEnders* (Appendix 4).

The Production Interviews: the Sample

The research sample includes interviews with a wide range of soap opera production staff involved in developing socially sensitive story lines over a four-year period (1993 to 1997). The interviewees were selected principally for their central role in story development and thus include those production workers who initially generated a story idea, who made key decisions about the story line development or who actually wrote or edited episode scripts. The sample is structured to include production personnel throughout the organisational hierarchy: Executive producers, story consultants, story editors, script - editors and script - writers. This enables me to analyse the dynamics of control and to explore the way in which power is mediated throughout the organisational structure. The sample is drawn predominantly from each of the four main British soap operas: *Coronation Street*, *EastEnders*, *Brookside* and *Emmerdale*. I negotiated access to *Brookside's* production team members and was able to spend time with different members of the production staff at *Mersey Television* Offices in Liverpool. I also negotiated access to *Coronation Street* offices at *Granada Television* in Manchester. Interviews with *EastEnders* staff and *Emmerdale* took place by telephone. In the case of *Emmerdale*, the production was going through a tense period of change in programme direction. There was a consequent turn over of staff and it was not possible to arrange interviews in person. In addition, I contacted the *Neighbours* production office at *Grundy Television* in Melbourne, Australia. Although I managed to acquire a written response, practical problems of geography (and budget) meant that I have far less data on the production of this soap than its British counterparts and use it

for comparison only²³. It is also worth noting that my efforts to arrange interviews with the actors who played key roles in the stories were unsuccessful. In particular I was keen to include the perspective of Anna Friel who played the role of 'Beth Jordache' in *Brookside*. In fact the actress was later sacked by the production and left the programme. The actress has since moved into Hollywood films and has a successful career beyond the television soap. Production staff from *Brookside* were remarkably helpful in facilitating access to the story team members however they were far less keen to facilitate access to the actors.

The study was developed to also conduct interviews with a small selection of production team members working in formats other than the television soap. My concern here was to investigate potential variations in occupational cultures and ideologies of television production team members in producing programmes with mental distress as a theme in different formats. Exploring the pressures and constraints operating on for example, the independent documentary Producer allowed me to provide a point of comparison to my interviewees with soap opera production personnel. It would be possible to explore whether there are production factors which are unique to the soap format and the extent to which these are shared by other television formats. By examining the same issue in different formats it was possible to explore the extent to which the nature of the topic and how it is positioned socio culturally may influence treatment. This, I believed would prevent over generalisation and would also allow me to map the limitations and possibilities of television formats other than the television soap.

²³ The core interview sample was complemented by interviews with production staff working on different television programmes such as children's dramas, *Press Gang* and *Children's Ward*. Although I do not draw upon these in discussion of my results they provided comparative data with other production personnel.

Production workers ranged in experience from script - writers on short term contracts who had only ever worked on one programme to those who have worked within the broadcast industry for many years and across different programmes. The inclusion of the latter was particularly important as more experienced workers may bring different personal agendas to their job and may also illuminate the impact of different occupational cultures on their working experiences. I also attempted to address questions of gender influence and where possible interviewed both male and female production staff.

In addition, where appropriate, the scheduling of interviews was 'media' and public response led. In this respect I was able to respond to controversies as they happened and contact production personnel to discuss story lines which had attracted strong media criticism or were investigated by regulatory bodies.

The conduct of the interviews

The production interviews were topic specific in the sense that interviewees were approached initially due to their involvement with a particular story line however interviews were designed to address the topic comparatively and I encouraged interviewees to make comparisons with other topics. For example, in discussing child sexual abuse story lines production staff regularly referred back to previous sexual violence story lines. When discussing breast cancer story lines I was interested in how the soap opera treatment of the disease might differ from tackling other health topics including mental health problems.

Examining a single topic in isolation would therefore have provided only a limited study of production values. In interviews, it was when production staff drew on other issues which they had found 'difficult to do' that the production process and media values which underpinned this, became most sharply defined. By examining story lines which attempt to push the boundaries in terms of soap programming it is possible to analyse and articulate the limits and constraints of the soap agenda and provide an analysis of the tensions which underpin production decisions.

Interviewees were contacted initially by letter and then followed up by a face to face or telephone interview. The interview was tape-recorded and then fully transcribed. Some interviews lasted for 20 minutes, others for an hour and a half. The introductory letter briefly outlined my research interests and in the case of soap opera production personnel also included two or three fairly specific questions regarding characters or story line plots. The interview was structured in the sense that I asked the same initial questions of each of my interviewees which enabled me to tabulate responses from those occupying different positions within the hierarchy and across different programmes (and formats) to compare and contrast responses. It was also crucial to allow additional open questions to generate more reflexive responses and allow the interviewees themselves to draw parallels with working on different story topics and programmes (see Appendix 3 for sample interview schedule).

Extending the original remit beyond the specific story line under discussion also enabled me to articulate production tensions, to explore soap production as a process of struggle and examine the conditions under which 'difficult' story lines are produced.

Questions of access and confidentiality

In terms of negotiating access, soap opera production workers do receive regular approaches by researchers (particularly media students) and some explained that they just normally 'turn everyone down' via the production office where staff screen calls to individual workers. In this respect I found that access was more likely to be granted if their own interest was stimulated by posing focused questions which demonstrated close knowledge of characters and plot history. My approach strategy was strengthened by quickly approaching workers from different programmes - thus enabling me to state that I was speaking with their direct competitors - although this was on the understanding that I would not reveal future story lines or 'in-house' tensions. I found that access was also more likely if granted initially by those 'at the top' of the hierarchy who can simply ensure that production members make themselves available. The type of project that I was engaged in and the topic

under discussion also conceivably ensured access - academic discussion of high status health issues for example ensured a positive response at senior management levels - they wanted to be seen as helpful. This approach does have disadvantages however. The soap production world is tightly controlled and negotiating access through the production hierarchy made some staff uncomfortable, sometimes visibly so. I visited a soap opera production office to interview some of the staff. At one point a script writer expressed strong and detailed criticism of the internal censorship which, in his view, had prevented the development of an important and 'shocking' story line (in the area of sexual violence). Discussing censorship which comes from within the production team, rather than from regulatory bodies or, as some staff would put it 'channel suits', is very sensitive. In the middle of conversation the programme writer suddenly stopped talking, jerked his head nervously in the direction of the programme Producer (who could be seen hovering outside the room) and asked "This isn't all going back, is it?" The interview continued only when I was able to ensure that his comments would remain anonymous.

Script editors and writers are less frequently invited to offer their analysis than senior staff and some of these interviewees suggested that their involvement in the research study provided a rare and welcome opportunity to reflect on the internal workings of the industry and their role within it. This is borne out by the fact that the vast majority of my interviewees invited me to contact them in the future to ask additional questions or clarify points. In some instances I have therefore revisited interviews with some people over a period of years. This has not only provided the opportunity to develop and refine my analysis but crucially has allowed me to map changes brought about by the introduction of new senior staff. Discussing these points with interviewees at their home of course ensures a far more relaxed and informal interview situation than their work environment.

Retrospectively, it may have been possible to negotiate access to attend production meetings and adopt a participant observation approach to this study. However given that access for participant observation could only have been negotiated and approved by the programme Producer I believe that using

individual interviews facilitated the likelihood of having less senior production members confide internal tensions and disputes. In addition the time consuming nature of a participant observation study would have meant that I would have to limit the extent of the study in terms of programmes.

It is a measure of the tightly controlled and relatively insecure, soap opera production culture that a number of those whom I interviewed for this study did so on the understanding that they would not be identifiable. It is worth noting that within the soap production interviewees, the exceptions to this were always senior production staff (who are after all, the 'official' voices of the production). In several instances interviewees have since been promoted within the institution; moved to other productions or left the broadcasting industry entirely. Where possible I have referenced the interviewees by their job title at the time of interview however in some instances I have removed identifying markers to deliberately conceal their identity. This is of course regrettable as their role in the organisation is precisely what makes their contribution so valuable however it was more important to respect these requests than jeopardise their position.

Source Organisation Interviews

In addition to interviews with soap opera production staff I also conducted a number of interviews with those who provided advice to programme-makers on story lines. These collaborations between drama writers and advice agencies provided rich data and collaborators occupy a unique position within the production world, often becoming privy to future story developments while ultimately lacking control over how a story will develop. The level of involvement varied considerably in practice, some agencies were involved at very early stages in plot development and provided a useful insight into the intended nature of a story line, thus revealing the production values and indeed tensions which underpin the process of story development.

This interview data includes spokespeople for organisations who advised on story lines for the major soaps such as *Breast Cancer Care* and the *Imperial Cancer Research Fund* who advised on *EastEnders* and *Brookside* breast cancer story lines. Interviews with members of the *Womens Support Project*

and campaigners around mental health issues (*MIND*) and racism (*STOA*) were also carried out. In addition to this I included interviews with those who campaigned against story line developments (*Brooksides* intended 'Beth Jordache suicide') including representatives from the *Incest Survivors Network*.

Interviews were also conducted with those who evaluated public responses and compiled reports on telephone help line calls generated after story line transmission (such as *Broadcasting Support Services* and the help line co-ordinator for *Breast Cancer Care*). For a more general overview on the communication potential of soap operas interviews were conducted with press officers and communications managers for major health charities such as *MacMillan Cancer Relief*. These interviews explored the use of soap operas as opposed to news media to communicate messages, to aid public fund raising and to achieve 'brand positioning' for their organisation. All of these interviewees were asked to outline their role within the organisation and to discuss the overall aims of targeting different media.

Additional interviews on producing programmes on mental distress

In addition to the above interviews the study is informed by interviews which were conducted with production personnel from different media formats on the substantive topic of mental distress. For example, I not only spoke with soap production staff and source organisations regarding the challenges of portraying mental distress but also a selection of documentary makers. This was important because soap production workers frequently drew comparisons between themselves and documentary makers and this allowed me a unique insight into the commonalities and differences across genre and production culture. Interestingly, all of the documentary Producers that took part in the study of producing mental distress requested that they remained anonymous. The working life of a television Producer, especially an independent Producer, is relatively insecure and concern was expressed that remarks made in interview may have repercussions for future commissioned work. Interviews on the topic of mental distress were also carried out with Senior broadcasting personnel

(e.g. the Head of *BBC Drama*) and members of the television research drama series *Casualty*.

Analysis of the interviews

The interviews were analysed from full typewritten transcripts, although sometimes I re-listened to the tape recording for clarification. I tabulated the responses to key questions and analysed the transcript for key themes and recurring phrases. In particular I sought to draw out themes which were common to the topic under discussion and to the same production. For ease of reading and to highlight diversity of programme and topic the production case studies are structured around the following key areas: generating the story; casting and characterisation; taking audiences behind closed doors; language; the role of suspense and narrative pace; the issue on screen; advice from outside agencies.

Sometimes different members of the same production team gave slightly different accounts of story development. I have tried to draw attention to this diversity in my case study analysis. Where possible I cross - checked with other team members working on the same story. Where several different people have given the same account I have used quotations which seem to encapsulate the central point most succinctly. I have also sometimes contacted production personnel at the analysis stage to clarify any points with them directly. In all of these ways I have attempted to give an informed account of my interviewees perspectives and guard against over generalisation.

Audience responses to social issues in TV soaps: the case study of sexual violence in Brookside

This section introduces the audience reception strand of the study and outlines my methodology for studying how different audiences responded to a television soap opera story line - sexual violence in Channel Four soap opera *Brookside*. The audience study provided an important strand of the overall research design and enabled me to explore how different audiences respond and make sense of

serious issue story lines in soaps: using the specific case study of *Brookside's* sexual violence story line. I was also interested in links between production decision making processes, the nature of representation and audience understandings of key issues. The following sections address the overall aims of this part of the research and how the groups were composed, facilitated and the data analysed.

Aims of the Audience Reception Study

The audience reception study was designed to map audiences attitudes and beliefs around the fictional accounts of child sexual abuse and to explore the following key areas:

First, to explore attitudes towards whether or not the topic was appropriate within the soap opera format. Second, to examine responses to themes and characteristics of a specific treatment (*Brookside's* Jordache story). In particular to note what audiences bring to their viewing experiences. Third, to map existing attitudes and beliefs about the topic of child sexual abuse and the ways in which these shifted or changed as a result of watching the story lines. Fourth, to explore how audiences recall key images and dialogue and to examine the potential impact of soap story lines. My final concern was to examine variation in audience responses and the conditions under which people accept, reject or negotiate soap story messages. This includes contrasting viewer and non-viewer responses and important demographic variables such as age and gender. In particular, the study aimed to explore any differences in the responses of people with personal experience of sexual abuse and those who had no identifiable special interest or knowledge of the issue.

The Use of Focus Groups as a research tool

Focus groups are not new but in contemporary Britain they have come to have negative associations. This is due partly to the over reliance on the focus group by the British New Labour Government. Tony Blair, the Prime Minister has been accused of engaging in 'government by focus groups', altering public policy in line with 'what the public want' with little regard for integrity or political conviction

(Barbour and Kitzinger 1999: 1). The association between focus groups and marketing research has been well documented (Morgan 1988). However focus groups are now being used more visibly as a research tool by social scientists. I do not wish to outline the history of the 'focus group' but simply want to highlight that focus groups seemed to be the most appropriate method for studying how audiences respond to soap story lines. Television soaps more than other programmes may be most likely to be discussed with friends, family and work colleagues. The television soap is surrounded by gossip and 'talk'. Conducting focus group discussions therefore would enable me to tap into how people discuss soaps 'in real life'. The focus on 'child sexual abuse' and a story involving violence also meant that the group setting could operate as a way of diffusing a potentially difficult topic (in ways not possible with an individual interview for example). For discussion of how focus groups are being used in contemporary academic studies see (Barbour and Kitzinger 1999).

The audience sample: negotiating access

Twelve discussion groups, involving 69 participants were conducted with people living in the West of Scotland. Participants ranged in terms of age (13 to 66 years), gender and social background (Appendix 2). The sample is small and not representative of the population as whole but the purpose of the study was to examine the ways in which fictional representations of child sexual abuse were negotiated and 'made sense of' by these particular audiences. The groups were recruited by a variety of methods²⁴.

²⁴ For some groups (such as the private and state school students) I contacted the social guidance teacher and asked them to recruit a mixed gender group to meet within a study leave break in the school day. I had encountered problems in recruiting school students by first approaching head teachers. In one instance my request was refused on the grounds that the school was 'ethnically mixed' and there may be potential problems with gaining parental consent. Another difficult group to recruit were 'survivors of abuse'. Although I contacted several support groups, the sensitivity of the topic meant that group leaders refused to allow me access. I had anticipated that these problems might arise and left plenty of time in my research schedule for this group session. Access was finally negotiated to a group of teenage survivors

Special interest groups

Three sessions were conducted with people whom I have defined as “special interest” groups. These people worked with sexual abuse survivors or had experienced abuse themselves. It was both difficult and time consuming to recruit those who had personal experience of abuse. Access to one group of teenage girls who had been sexually abused was negotiated some time in advance and involved talking through the conduct of the session with social services staff. This is understandable as the teenagers were under the care of social services and it was essential that the staff responsible for their care were confident that discussing this topic would not compromise their emotional well being. I therefore discussed the design of the session in advance with the psychologist and social services key worker.

General population groups

The remaining nine groups involved people with no obvious personal or professional experience of child sexual abuse: 'general population groups'. However sometimes participants in these groups did know people who had been sexually abused or knew people who worked for intervention agencies. Occasionally participants disclosed within these sessions (on their questionnaires for example) that they had been abused themselves.

The groups were all pre-existing, in other words participants knew each other prior to the research sessions. Some worked together, for example social

of sexual abuse with the condition that the session was overseen by the educational psychologist and social worker who worked with the girls. For general population groups (e.g. office workers, students, foreign language teachers, flat mates) I produced a leaflet inviting participants to take part in a study in which they would be asked to share their views on media and sexual abuse (even if they had no strong opinions on the topic). The leaflet gave my contact details and University address. I then engaged the agreement of one person to act as group recruiter and asked them to recruit up to ten people to take part in the study.

workers from the same area team (based in Coatbridge); office workers (including cleaners and administrative staff from the same office in Glasgow's West End); foreign language teachers (Spanish, French and Irish teaching staff who worked for the same agency in central Glasgow). Others socialised together, for example, a group of young people who met at the local youth club in a deprived area of Glasgow (Clydebank). Retired women who lived in a middle-class suburb of Glasgow (Bishopbriggs) and met to plan trips to the theatre, ballet and opera and University of Glasgow students. Some of the groups lived together, for example, young people who shared a flat in Glasgow's East End. These participants worked in the service industry as bar staff and waitresses as well as at a local telephone call centre. I also included another group of young people who shared a flat in Glasgow's West End. Members of this group worked in PR and events promotion and one young woman was training to be an educational psychologist.

The fact that people in the groups knew each other meant that the sessions were fairly relaxed, which was crucial given the sensitivity of the topic. It also allowed for the preservation of some elements of the social culture within which people might usually discuss television, especially television soaps (with their work colleagues, friends and families).

The research participants were not pre-selected as regular soap opera or indeed Brookside. This is an important difference in how I composed my sample compared with most other audience studies of soap operas in which soap 'fans' are studied (Hobson 1982). The participants received no prior information regarding plot, story line or characters although for ethical reasons they were informed of the area of discussion. Some participants regularly watched the programme, others were occasional viewers and one group of retired people relied entirely on having seen press reports about the controversial storyline. This allowed me to note how soap story lines may infiltrate other media, or conversations with friends and family and indirectly reach audiences beyond those who actually watch the programme. It is also important to note that watching soap operas is not a seamless activity. Regular viewers may miss episodes and participants indicated on their questionnaires

that they often rely on friends and family to 'fill in the gaps'. It is also important to note that the groups were conducted from June 1993 to June 1994. In the case of Brookside they were therefore all conducted after 'Mandy' had killed 'Trevor', but before the transmission of Brookside episodes which portrayed 'Beth' and 'Mandys' trial for murder.

Running the sessions

Each session was designed to include eight people (mixed male and female). In practice the size of the groups ranged between three and ten and some groups were composed entirely of women. I facilitated all of the groups myself and sessions were convened in schools, youth club centres, work places or participants' homes. With the exception of school based sessions, most were held in the evening. The sessions usually lasted over an hour but not longer than two hours. All sessions were tape-recorded. Participants first completed a short questionnaire which covered basic demographics (age, gender) and television viewing habits (for example, the frequency with which they watched different television soaps) and asked the question 'Should child sexual abuse be portrayed in fictional television?' There was also space in which participants could give more information on any aspect of their biography that they felt was important. Here, some people did identify themselves as having been sexually abused. The group was then divided into two or more subgroups and invited to engage in a script-writing exercise. This involved giving them a set of photographs taken from a key scene in *Brooksides'* story line (where Trevor climbs into bed with daughter Rachel). The sub groups were then asked to write matching dialogue. The group participants returned to discuss their scripts (how easy or difficult it had been to construct dialogue, the handling of specific characters, key moments in the story) and to debate the motivations of different characters and the inclusion of such an issue in television soap opera.

The soap script writing group exercise

The groups took part in a soap script writing exercise which was developed from the 'News Game', developed at the Glasgow Media Group to explore

audiences memories and beliefs of media coverage (Philo 1990). Audiences use a set of photographs which have been taken from a television news bulletin and 'take on the role of' journalists to produce a script which 'fits' the photographs. This method has been used successfully to map attitudes and beliefs around media coverage of the 1984 Miner's Strike (Philo 1990); AIDS (Kitzinger 1990b); Northern Ireland (Miller 1994) and alleged sexual abuse on the Island of Orkney (Kitzinger and Skidmore 1995a). It was further adapted for the purposes of fictional media to explore audience perceptions of mental health and illness (Philo 1996b). Groups work from photographs of key scenes in television coverage (news reports or soap story lines) and write dialogue for the participants or characters (for discussion of these methods see (Kitzinger 1990a).

The decision to use photographs rather than screen specific episodes in the group session was crucial because the aim of the study was to explore audience attitudes and beliefs around the issue as a whole rather than simply gauge reactions to a specific scene. The use of photographs allowed participants to create their own dialogue in a way which had not been pre-determined. The session was more 'open' to participants agenda and not shaped by original language and emphases. In addition, audiences memories of the scene and the key moments for them could be highlighted. As has been noted elsewhere, the actual process of producing scripts also performs the important function of facilitating a relaxed and informal setting, with banter and humour which characterises other more natural social settings (Philo 1996b). I would also argue that there are additional advantages to the use of photographs as compared with screening a television programme in a research session. Firstly, the showing of videos is in practical terms extremely limiting. For example, not every household will have a video cassette player and therefore it is easier to convene groups in an institutional setting. This of course influences the session in two ways. Firstly, the attendance of participants, some people may not wish to travel to a University for example, but are happy to turn up at a friends' house. Secondly it influences the nature of the session - watching a television programme in an artificial setting may be more convenient for the researcher but undoubtedly leads to heightened awareness of the topic under

discussion. I was therefore able to be extremely flexible in terms of where and when I could convene the groups. Also, to screen a soap opera episode in entirety is time consuming whereas the photos could be quickly handed around and the exercise begin. Recruiting willing research participants may be even more difficult if they are expected to devote longer than one hour or so to a research study. Indeed, the requirement of spending any longer could seriously skew the kinds of people able to take part to those with more time (for example, students, retired or unemployed people). It is perhaps worth mentioning however that a study of women and violence in the media commissioned by the Broadcasting Standards Council involved a seven hour day spent watching different programmes at a University (Schlesinger et al. 1992). The women who took part in the study were asked to view the programmes as though they were in their own homes (Schlesinger et al. 1992: 27. However it is difficult to imagine how this could be possible and most of the women pointed out that they rarely had the opportunity to spend such uninterrupted time watching television. The group setting is always artificial but I did attempt to make the sessions informal. Watching soaps involves discussion with others as well as carrying out other household tasks and I encouraged participants to talk to each other and engage in group debate.

Analysing the focus group data

Each of the focus group sessions was tape recorded and fully transcribed. I carried out the transcription myself as it was a valuable way of re-listening to the sessions to aid in analysis. The transcripts were then coded and analysed for broad themes and for variation both within and across the groups. The coding and analysis was carried out manually on the transcripts rather than using a computerised coding package such as NUDIST (for discussion of merits of computerised analysis see Barbour and Kitzinger 1999). After reading each transcript through fully, I tabulated the responses to my questions or prompts. To give an example, I collated all of the transcript material across each of the groups which related to my question "Why do you think Trevor abused his daughter Rachel?" In addition to this first stage of analysis, I marked each passage of transcript material with a numerical code. For example, I noted

every occasion when group participants spontaneously raised Trevor's motivations and every mention of recurring phrases such as 'he did it before' or where participants spoke of central explanatory themes such as male 'power'. I also noted absences (i.e. when themes such as male power were not mentioned in a particular group). In this way all of the transcript material was coded and then analysed across the different groups for variation in response. This enabled me to analyse the data within and across groups, identifying where there was a consensus or inconsistencies.

Ethical considerations in running the groups

Participants were all assured of complete confidentiality and were informed of the discussion topic prior to the session - in other words that the subject of discussion was media and child sexual abuse. They were not told that discussion would focus specifically on the sexual abuse story lines in *Brookside*. The fact that the groups were discussing media representations of sexual abuse meant that the focus was not on their personal experience, although of course the participants were free to discuss whatever they wished in relation to the topic. However the sessions were designed to be as relaxed as possible and not to place any participant under pressure to discuss prior knowledge of abuse. Given the nature of the research topic under investigation, I also found that the use of photographs was ethically less problematic than using video sequences from a soap opera. This is a dilemma, which other researchers conducting studies of sexualised violence have faced. The group who carried out the research on women and violence were forced to alter their selection in light of pilot screenings. The film, *Blue Velvet* (directed by David Lynch) was originally intended to form part of that research study. However the film has strong themes of sado - masochism and the portrayal and problematic condoning of sexualised violence in this film was revealed to be 'grossly offensive' to women (Schlesinger et al. 1992: 20). There are therefore several methodological and practical advantages to using a photograph exercise of this type. Not least of which is the ethical responsibility of ensuring that research participants who have experienced sexual violence are not made to feel uncomfortable.

As part of the negotiation process for convening a session with young women who had been sexually abused it was agreed that a social worker and educational psychologist should be present throughout the discussion. In this instance the group session was designed around some specific concerns. For example, these young women discussed Brookside but did not take part in the script writing exercise partly because they lacked confidence in literacy skills (and lacked confidence also in discussion) but also because there were time constraints. The members of the group were taken home by taxis ordered at a specified time by their social services key worker which meant that the session could not over run.

At the close of each session every participant was routinely given an appropriate leaflet containing details of telephone help line services. Such leaflets included those produced by *ChildLine* and the *Women's Support Project* (Glasgow). I believed that it was essential to simply hand everyone out a leaflet rather than waiting for participants to identify themselves as being in need of help. Sometimes young people asked to take away additional help line leaflets for friends. I also made myself available at the end of the discussions, taking time to clear up any materials and recording equipment. This meant that I could speak informally to any participants who wanted to ask about the research or to respond to issues which they might have felt unable to discuss within the group setting.

Chapter Four: programme and genre diversity

INTRODUCTION

Soap opera representations of social issues are frequently the focus of attention for a range of groups. Activists, policy makers, lay audiences and media commentators have criticised and debated how contemporary issues are presented in the soaps and clearly assume that these fictional images matter. There is however a tendency to discuss television 'soaps' as a homogenous entity. This assumption, that soaps are all the same, is both wrong and unhelpful. I would argue that the data presented in this chapter demonstrates the importance of differentiating between the different soap operas because although they are producing material within the same genre, their production philosophies can be very different and accordingly audiences bring different expectations to their viewing experience. Just as the substantive topic of story lines should be positioned within a wider socio - cultural landscape - so too should the programmes in which these story lines appear.

This chapter places the different soap opera programmes in their institutional and commercial context. We see how the distinct production philosophy and ethos of the soap opera programme may influence the development of social issue story lines. We also begin to see the complexity of the soap opera production process (e.g. how the team process operates, how different production personnel perceive their role). This chapter and chapter five which follows, aims to identify how the soap opera production process functions 'in theory' and 'in practice'.

A PROFILE OF DIVERSE SOAPS ON BRITISH TELEVISION

The importance of production philosophies

As noted above, before looking at the production context of specific soap story lines, in the areas of breast cancer, sexual violence and mental distress, it is useful to first give an overview of the diverse soaps involved in the study. Soap opera production teams may work within the same genre but the interviews conducted with production personnel do reveal that all soaps have a distinct programme identity and production philosophy. Broadly speaking BBC1's *EastEnders* and Channel Four's *Brookside* are popularly assumed to pursue the same aims: social messages intertwined with entertainment whereas ITV's *Coronation Street* has traditionally eschewed social controversy in favour of a blend of 'comedy and drama'. *Brookside* and *EastEnders* share a 'public issue' agenda and both productions have remained at the forefront of 'issue' drama dealing fairly consistently with controversial material. Both programmes pushed British soap opera in the direction of social issue drama, dealing with issues overtly and moving social problems from the personal plight to the public sphere. In so doing, new audiences of young people and male viewers were sought and the traditional image of the female housewife soap viewer became an outdated concept²⁵.

Coronation Street: Family Entertainment

ITV's *Coronation Street* was first transmitted on the 9th of December 1960 to the Granada region and was networked in 1961. The programme increased output

²⁵ Part of this agenda was the role of these soaps in broadening the ethnic mix of characters in popular drama and producing story lines with a strong anti-racism message. Critics have however argued that attempts to incorporate Black characters into these predominantly white narratives have had limited success and that such characters tend to carry 'Black issue' story lines and in this sense, continue to be marginalized (for discussion of the 1980's new soaps see (Geraghty 1991).

from two to three episodes a week in 1989 and is currently screening 4 episodes per week. The most recent viewing figures for a single episode were 15.29 million (BARB, week ending 2 December 2001).

Coronation Street has been, within a British context, subject to more serious academic attention than might be expected. The programme was analysed from Marxist/ Feminist perspectives in a British Film Institute Monograph on the grounds that the serial claimed to be 'about' working class culture and contained social images of working class culture which for the time were fairly rare on British television (Dyer et al. 1981). The serial is regarded as embodying the values of a 1950's working class culture and was seen to reflect on aspects of the influential *Uses of Literacy* (Hoggart 1959) in a number of specific ways. First, the emphasis on common sense, second, the absence of work and politics, third, the stress on 'strong' women and fourth, the perspective of nostalgia. These themes, it was argued, defined *Coronation Street's* fictional world (Dyer et al. 1981: 4). Certainly the Northern soap opera was developed at a time when 'working class culture' was emerging as the focus of a 'new wave' in British film (see *Room at the Top*, *A Kind of Loving* and *Look Back in Anger*) as well as theatre and novels. There are a number of analyses of social realism in British film (Hill 1986).

The current programme agenda of *Coronation Street* is, according to the Producer, in marked contrast with other soaps and their social message agendas. Rather than purposely inserting 'issue' story lines, *Coronation Street's* Producer insists that future story development is generated simply by the realistic concerns of characters. This is of course, something of a circular argument however, since the 'issues' which the fictional characters will find 'important' or 'concerning' will depend entirely on how their character has been constructed (i.e. by those in 'control', the production team). Despite this significant anomaly, the *Street's* Producer explains that programme development must continue to be generated 'organically', through the 'natural' development of characters and that the production should resist lobbying from pressure groups:

The interesting thing about 'The Street' is that people feel comfortable with it and people can watch it as a family. All our stories are generated by the characters in the programme. We are not issue led. We don't sit around and say 'Let's have a story about rape'. Many people write to us and say 'Would you debate this issue? And would you please let everyone know it is national breast feeding week?' and I have to write back and say 'No' to everybody because we just then become a political machine. It would become propaganda that we were churning out and we are supposed to be entertaining people, not brainwashing them. (04mif)

In this sense she believes that *Coronation Street* is distinct in having chosen to use the power of the soap medium to offer the British public 'message free' enjoyment. As she continues:

EastEnders and Brookside have chosen to use that power to give a message to the British public. What we have done is chosen to use that power to entertain the British public. In other words give them good television. We aren't thrusting issues down their throat because they get enough of that with news and documentaries. We just want people to relax and enjoy themselves. (04mif)

Brookside: Programming for Change

Channel Four's *Brookside* was first transmitted on 2nd November 1982 (the first day of Channel 4) and is currently screened thrice weekly and repeated in a weekend omnibus edition. Most recent viewing figures for a single episode were 4.01 million (BARB week ending 2 December 2001).

Brookside consistently attracts the highest ratings of any programme screened by Channel 4, with an average of 5.5 million viewers. Over a week around 10 - 11 million people see *Brookside*. Audiences are particularly young for a soap opera (50% are aged under 35 years). In recent years *Brookside* has dealt consistently with topical and controversial social issues. Previous story lines have addressed homosexuality, HIV and AIDS, drug misuse and both 'stranger'

and 'acquaintance' rape. Phil Redmond, who devised the programme, proposes that by taking up social and political topics the soap opera format might 'balance the dramatic requirements of modern, small-screen entertainment with a real sense of depth, concern and insight' (Kilborn 1992: 170). His personal agenda very much determines the programme remit. As Redmond comments: 'I have always argued for socially strong drama and it has always proved to be popular' (Redmond 1985: 41). *Brookside* selects potential story lines by a radically different method to other soaps. The programme is explicitly 'issue-led' and whereas writers may propose ideas in meetings it is also not unusual for story line developments to come directly from 'the top'. The executive producer and producer of the show have biannual meetings where the long - term strategy for the show is mapped out: statistical trends of unemployment, crime and social problems are used to compose 'demographically correct' plots with text book characters. *Brookside's* production philosophy has not arguably changed from Phil Redmond's original vision and he has always openly discussed the deliberate inclusion of representative characters in the programme. In the following quote for example Phil Redmond outlines how the programme was constructed originally around key families which were drawn to represent 'the four elements of society'. Redmond explains this as follows:

When we started out, we had the Collinses, the Grants, the Huntingtons and the Taylors as the four elements of society on the Close. The Collinses represented the management capitalist leg; the Grants represented the trade union movement; the Huntingtons were a young professional couple; and the Taylors represented the black economy (Tibballs 1998: 8).

The Producer argues that *Brookside*, can offer a far more 'realistic' portrayal of social issues than other dramas. As he comments 'if someone has a

breakdown in Brookside they never get over it because life's not like that'. However, this focus on social realism is balanced constantly with the perceived needs of audiences. Story lines therefore might arise from a well-researched base but for audience enjoyment they must then be 'packaged': As the Producer explains:

The trick is to take all (the statistics) and not do a documentary on it or people will go 'It's just facts and figures, it's a documentary'. The trick is to package it in a story which has become soap opera because you make it entertainment then. You make people guess and use all the tricks of soap opera which is 'Will she do this? Will she do that? (15csam).

Despite an initially socially realistic approach to subject material, values of entertainment and acceptability to audiences are crucial. Programme-makers generally do not wish to be perceived by audiences as 'educating' them, particularly in the soap opera genre. This is seen to conflict with the role of that particular format. By 'packaging' stories for audience consumption, *Brookside* sees itself as provoking audience debate rather than providing audiences with clear social messages which can be mistaken for 'education'. As the Producer argues here:

(Audiences) are not finding in Brookside any answers. That's how you educate, you give people answers. If I started to believe we are educating, God, you know? What have I become? I couldn't! (15csam).

Brookside has from the outset, had a production philosophy which is explicitly 'programming for change' (Tibballs 1998). Indeed *Brookside* is more ruthlessly 'issue led' in strategy and philosophy than any other drama serial. *Brookside's* Producer and production team members quite openly acknowledge that characters are introduced regularly to maintain a constant source of new social

problems for the show to address. The role of the programme is clearly outlined by *Brookside's* Producer here:

Brookside's there to provoke debate, we're there to rattle the cage on life's seedier side, on things that society would prefer to hide under the carpet. That's my brief and that's what I want to do as producer. Make strong drama at a time accessible to everyone (15csam).

EastEnders: Reflecting 'Reality'

EastEnders was initially transmitted on BBC1 in February 1985 and is currently screened four times weekly with a repeat weekend omnibus edition. Most recent viewing figures for a single episode were 16.74 million (BARB, for week ending 2 December 2001).

EastEnders was designed to both build a crucial mid evening audience and also to fill a gap in the BBC's drama output. Aiming for a less self- consciously didactic approach to social issues than *Brookside*, the programme nevertheless assembled the requisite characters through which the 'realities of contemporary inner-city life' might be examined. As Julia Smith who developed the programme along with Tony Holland said:

We decided to go for a realistic, fairly outspoken type of drama which could encompass stories about homosexuals, rape, unemployment, racial prejudice, etc. in a believable context. Above all we wanted realism. Unemployment, exams, racism, birth, death, dogs, babies, unmarried mums- we didn't want to fudge any issue except politics and swearing (Buckingham 1987 :16).

The extent to which *EastEnders* was designed as a cynical attempt to recapture the BBC's audience share from ITV or simply to illustrate that public service broadcasting could also be popular without diminishing quality and responsibility is debatable (Buckingham 1987). However it is worth noting that the personal vision of *EastEnders* creators Smith and Holland remains constant

almost twenty years later. For example, it was striking that while production workers from other soap operas regarded *EastEnders* and *Brookside* as equally 'issue led' the *EastEnders* production staff themselves disagreed. For them, the *EastEnders* declared story line ethos echoes that of *Coronation Street* where character development rather than contemporary 'issues' underpins story line decision-making. *EastEnders* staff whom I interviewed rejected accusations that issues could be 'just bolted on' to characters because, in their view, 'it just won't work' for audiences. This position is exemplified in the words of a senior production member who outlines his vision of *EastEnders* as a programme where 'issues' simply emerge 'naturally':

What we do is create a microcosm of society within Albert Square. Therefore it would, hopefully, naturally reflect the problems and troubles of people of 20th Century England. I know we don't deliberately set out to tackle issues (22bcm).

This perception of 'issues' emerging 'naturally' echoes the earlier words of the Producer of *Coronation Street* and is in distinct contrast with the *Brookside* vision, where there is no attempt to conceal the ethos of the programme as 'issue led'.

Emmerdale: Taking the Production in a new direction

ITV's *Emmerdale* was originally transmitted as *Emmerdale Farm* on 16th October 1972 and is currently screened on each week day. Most recent viewing figures for a single episode were 11.33 million (BARB, week ending 2 December 2001).

The ITV soap *Emmerdale*, as it is now known, has traditionally been absent from serious academic study and cultural comment. This absence is perhaps partly because *Emmerdale Farm*, as it was previously entitled did not include 'issue' story lines and focused entirely on detailing rural farming life. The programme identity was one which did not attempt to incorporate serious contemporary problems. In chapter five, I address the background to the commercial pressures brought to bear on the programme and the

consequences of this for the development of specific story lines. Here, it is simply worth noting that *Emmerdale* did not only change the title of the programme but with this rebranding (instigated by senior television executives concerned that the *Emmerdale* audience was not 'advertiser friendly' enough) the programme sought new and younger audiences. The programme ethos within which story lines had been developed over the previous twenty years or so was radically altered in effect and arguably what happened with *Emmerdale* provides one of the most interesting examples of how a soap opera may make 'issues' work in economic terms. This particular soap opera has now effectively increased audience ratings with a series of 'issue' story lines but the Producer who guided the programme through these changes claims that it is realistic characterisation rather than cynical strategies which are of key concern. She argues that, increased ratings are an incidental and indeed welcome, by-product of character led stories and that it is possible to retain professional integrity within the intensely competitive soap production world as is illustrated in the following quote:

Stories (in *Emmerdale*) are character led. Now if out of that comes a good story about child abuse which raises the ratings then all well and good. I'm fulfilling my brief which is to make a programme appeal to as wide a range of audiences as possible. There is a cynicism in that respect but I have an integrity as a programme maker (12csaf).

A measure of success is that in 1993, *Emmerdale* achieved audience ratings of 13.5 million (BARB figures). This figure peaked in 1994 to 19.1 million during a dramatic New Year storyline in which a Boeing 747 crashes on the village (neatly killing off older cast members in the process). However this process of 'spicing up' the programme sparked media controversy - not simply because the unlikely crash story suggested a cynical ratings ploy but the episode was screened close to the anniversary of the Lockerbie air crash. In fact, the Broadcasting Standards Council upheld complaints about the "insensitive" episode. The dramatic change in *Emmerdale's* agenda did result in critical audience feed back but the Producer believed that challenging issues in popular

soaps will always receive a proportion of negative reception. As she outlines below:

There were letters from people who said 'I don't want to watch *Emmerdale* doing stories like sexual abuse leave it to *EastEnders* and *Brookside*'. But with everything we do we get letters saying 'Give us more farming and give us lots of nice shots of the countryside we don't want to hear about people's miseries and woes (12csaf).

Although the Producer defended this new direction on the show these management decisions were undoubtedly the source of considerable inter-production tension²⁶. Yorkshire Television Director of Programmes John Whiston remarked on the success with which *Emmerdale* has captured new, younger audiences. In his view *Emmerdale* should now be regarded in the same terms as *EastEnders* and *Coronation Street* as Whiston says here: "From now on in terms of soaps, it's the big three, not the big two plus *Emmerdale*" (BBC news online 3 July 2000).

Neighbours: A sanitised world in the imported soap

The study is concerned with British soap opera but the Australian soap opera *Neighbours* provides an interesting point of comparison. The soap opera was first transmitted in Australia on the 18th March 1985 and imported by BBC1 for UK audiences in October 1986. It is currently screened at lunchtime on every week day and repeated in the early evening pre-news slot of 1735. The most recent viewing figures for a single episode were 7.83 million (BARB, for week ending 2nd December 2001).

²⁶ I was fortunate to gain access to ex production members who had resigned over the pressures resulting from the shows new direction and who saw such stories as entirely exploitative.

It is instructive to contrast the 'dirty' social realism of most British soap operas with the imported Australian soap. *Neighbours* offers a snapshot of community far removed from an issue - driven *Brookside* or class-based *EastEnders*. One critic, remarking on the popularity of *Neighbours* and *Home and Away* suggested that much of this success is due to the fantasy world which these soaps present to British audiences:

The Australian soaps look nice. The land down under is warm and the people live in nice houses and they are attractive.

Ramsay Street and Summer Bay is a never-never land of the beautiful people. Life would be very pleasant there if it could be as it is presented (Hubbard 1995:23).

However in presenting this 'never-never land' *Neighbours* has provoked particularly fierce criticism. Germaine Greer derided this sanitised representation of Australia where a diverse multi-cultural community populated by immigrants becomes transposed into, 'the Australian version of the American dream, owner-occupied, White-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant paradise' (Greer 1989). The programme has also been labelled quite simply "adolescent-trash" due to its large following of teenagers and young school children. *Neighbours* has consistently drawn and maintained massive UK viewing figures. Much of this success is due to strategic scheduling. Firstly, in an unprecedented move, *Neighbours* became the first programme on British television to be 'stripped', in other words, shown every week day. Furthermore, by running an early morning repeat (9.02 a.m.), the programme ensured a daytime audience of housewives, students and unemployed people. *Neighbours* achieved maximum popularity when in January 1988, Michael Grade, then Controller for BBC, re-scheduled this early morning slot to a pre- 'tea-time' news slot (1735). In a much recounted story Grade's decision was based on pressure from his own teenage daughter who described how she and her school friends crowded around any

available television to watch the programme at lunch time (Crofts 1995). This shrewd rescheduling meant that *Neighbours* doubled its audience to 16.25 million in just six weeks. By Christmas of the same year *Neighbours* had become the UK top rated programme (ahead of *EastEnders*) with approximately twenty million viewers. Audiences have fallen from this peak but *Neighbours* consistently remains in the ten top rated UK programmes.

Neighbours was devised by Reg Watson and it is worth noting that Watson also created the long running British soap opera, *Crossroads*. Watson cites this previous experience as crucial in decision-making about the programme content of *Neighbours*. He believes that to run realistic story lines is to risk losing audiences. As he explains here:

Quite often subjects we (*Neighbours*) would consider handling are best left to be done as a documentary. I learned this years ago on "Crossroads". I considered doing a drugs story using Meg's daughter. But the honest thing would have been for her to die - not miraculously recover and I didn't want viewers upset and switching off. It doesn't mean I want happy endings each time, but there are no wild developments. A barking dog would be as likely to start a feud as anything (Kingsley 1988: 361).

The agenda of *Neighbours* as 'character' rather than 'issue-led' has not altered significantly in recent years. In the *Neighbours* remit, the focus is upon 'entertainment' where the 'minutiae of domestic life' may be examined but rarely will include social problems. As the Story Editor, explained below:

Neighbours has not in general and does not at present tackle very many serious social problems. We are in the business of being entertaining and engaging and to that end are spending most of our story time examining the minutiae of domestic and suburban life (25csaf).

Of course this assumption offers a very limited view of the reality of 'domestic and suburban life'. It suggests a world where sexual abuse, violence and serious illness are absent from every day 'minutiae'. However the production has, in the past, moved out with their usual agenda. In July 1993, British audiences saw a story line about the attempted abduction of a child in which a young girl, Hannah Martin, was lured to a strangers' car²⁷. Although the story line was resolved positively, the man later confesses and agrees to go for counselling, there were complaints and the story was investigated by the Broadcasting Standards Council. Several key episodes were watched however the Committee decided that no complaint should be upheld. A number of reasons were given for this decision including that BBC research suggested that *Neighbours* had a "high level of continuity of viewing" and the story line was broadcast to UK audiences in the Summer when national child protection campaigns focused on 'Stranger Danger' were being run" (1993d).

The move towards this type of material is interesting but the motivations which lie behind developing this abduction story remain unclear. The *Neighbours* Story Editor denied that a controversial story of this type would ever be generated for audience ratings purposes. As she explains:

I have no comment in relation to the motivation or direction that the show was heading at the time. To my knowledge no *Neighbours* story team has ever believed in telling stories in a titillating manner, for their shock value for suspect motives or reasons of gratuitous or vicarious violence (25csaf).

²⁷ The *Neighbours* fictional story provided a hook for a tabloid newspaper report on a 'real life' attack on a 14 year old girl. The feature begins by saying "Sarah leans forward in her seat, transfixed by a scene from *Neighbours* on the family TV. Holding her breath she watches in silence as the little girl on the screen agonises over whether to report a sex attacker who has tried to abduct her " (Midgley 1993).

The production team is not of course entirely autonomous with respect to the kinds of issues which *Neighbours* will tackle. For example, a crucial factor in the success of *Neighbours* has been the extraordinary take up of the programme by overseas countries. Over twenty-five countries have imported *Neighbours* including the USA. However as an exported soap opera *Neighbours* must balance demands and constraints of broadcasting not only within Australia but also for these overseas buyers. In fact the production team admits that the broadcast hierarchy in Australia and UK have actively intervened to ensure that the programme agenda is explicitly tailored to meet these needs. That *Neighbours* remains 'non-issue' based, is then influenced by perceived U.K audience requirements. Particular constraints come from *Neighbours* pre-watershed transmission to British viewers which are predominantly composed of school children. As a production member outlines:

We (the production team) have been instructed in the last year from the BBC and Network 10 in Australia, not to write stories that are 'issue based' for many reasons. That it cuts across other programmes, that the "to air" time in England, Scotland and Wales is a great deal earlier than it is in Australia, and a bowing to the new conservatism sweeping those three countries (25csaf).

The ways in which story lines are developed and the constraints on the production team raise important questions about the soap opera production process. In the next chapter these questions are addressed more fully with respect to different issues in the British soaps. However the comments from the *Neighbours* Story Editor reflect the concern that controversial story lines should not be viewed simply in terms of increasing the ratings and that story lines may

reflect wider social and cultural values of a society (an additional problem for the imported soap)²⁸.

It is also worth noting that, with the exception of *Brookside*, soap production personnel are at pains to express the 'organic' nature of their story lines. It is particularly interesting that staff working for *EastEnders* should be so keen to disassociate themselves from an issue led agenda. However although this professional 'discourse' purports that it is simply character biography which influences the take-up of particular issues, it is clear that soap operas are 'big business' and economic concerns can and frequently do override a commitment to simply following through on character psychology. The next section examines television soaps and commercial imperatives.

TELEVISION SOAP OPERA AND THE COMMERCIAL IMPERATIVE

The production philosophies may differ but all soaps share a commitment to commercial imperatives. This is made most explicit with *Emmerdale*, *Coronation Street* and *Brookside*, broadcasting as they do on commercial television. Soap operas are at the forefront of recent changes within the broadcasting industry and commercial concerns can indeed influence the development of socially controversial stories. This is a point which is rarely made explicit by production

²⁸ Despite being unwilling to comment more fully on the development of *Neighbours* story lines, the Story Editor was keen to draw a distinction between the priorities of the script teams on the programme and senior management. As she responds here "It may well be that certain plots are included to increase audience ratings but to get an answer to this you would have to ask either the Network executives, the Production house owners or the advertisers. There are many directives from above to tackle certain stories that as a writer one would not choose to do. In the twenty five years I have worked in this industry I have never known a situation where a writer exploited a story in order to increase audience ratings. That is not what writers are about" (25csaf). This comment reflects the distinct identity of the writing team working on television soaps as we shall see in the following chapter.

staff. However one soap opera production worker who wished to remain anonymous told me, quite simply that:

Every production company on the independent television network would like to have its soap because it is the biggest money earner there is. (Television soap opera) makes lots and lots of money (Soap opera worker).

Television soap opera forms a major part of the British television industry output which, as a whole, is under intense commercial pressure. Jeremy Tunstall has noted that while the television soap opera is at the bottom end of the 'drama-prestige scale', the soap opera is a crucial part of the channels' image and economic success. As Tunstall describes here: "Successful soaps, of course, achieve large, or very large, audiences at a remarkably low cost per audience-hour, and at a surprisingly low total cost per year" (Tunstall 1993: 114).

Commercial imperatives do play a crucial role in television drama production. Indeed the experienced television Producer Tony Garnett (who worked with Ken Loach on *Cathy Come Home*) reflected on the conflicting agendas of drama production teams; broadcasting management; advertisers and regulators, proposing that:

The ad buyers are the biggest power in television and indirectly control the content of most of it. Ask yourselves, who do the broadcasters most want - indeed, need – to please? (Garnett 1998).

It is an obvious point but certainly worth noting that the soaps who operate within the commercial sector are required to 'deliver-up' audiences for advertisers. Indeed all of those I interviewed 'at the top' of the production hierarchy acknowledged that production decisions are made with advertising needs in mind, albeit implicitly. *Coronation Street* which recently renewed a £10 million sponsorship deal with *Cadbury Schweppes*, offers prime advertising breaks and the producer did acknowledge the pressure to maintain the programme's market positioning:

If you are producing a show, which regularly tops the ratings, the advertisers want to advertise in the breaks and the pressure is to be consistently good within the parameters (04mif).

Brookside (which is made independently by Phil Redmond's company, Mersey TV) attracts particularly young audiences - 50% of viewers are aged under 35 years. The Producer argues that a successful soap must assemble a cast which at least includes the most desirable age range for advertisers:

The advertisers love these 16 to 34 (year olds) because they've got the money. They will spend money on CD's or whatever so the advertisers like that. We never sit down and say 'Right we're going to target this audience' but you do make sure that you've got a range of characters that reflect the type of stories you want to do and reflect the society that is out there (18csam).

Soap producers are under intense pressure to develop story lines which maintain existing audiences and of course attract new viewers. Jeremy Tunstall has noted that in comparison with other television Producers, soap opera Producers are closer to the organisational hierarchy. As Tunstall observes "when the producer of such a programme (the soap) wants to tinker with the script and production formulae he is also tinkering with a prominent piece of the corporate structure. Soap producers thus tend to get involved in internal corporate negotiations in a way that most producers do not" (Tunstall 1993: 116).

Soap Producers are undoubtedly under pressure. For *EastEnders* (made 'in-house' at the *BBC*) and *Coronation Street* (produced by *Granada TV*) an additional concern is the inter genre competition for 'top rated' soap opera. Both programmes attract ratings which fluctuate around 15 to 18 million people for a single episode and have engaged in a series of 'head to head' scheduling battles. As soap production teams struggle to maintain their position within a changing broadcast industry, advertising concerns can play a significant role in altering soap 'parameters'. In the context of introducing controversial issue story lines one soap opera production worker made the following statement:

Soap is at the forefront for ratings and the advertisers have their requirements. The whole notion about television is that you grab an audience at 7 and it stays with you all night because audiences tend not to switch over. That's a brutal fact of life. No one makes soaps out of a concern for social justice (Soap opera production worker).

THE SOAP STORY LINE AS A MEDIATED PRODUCT

Over and above the overall 'identity' of a programme, soap opera accounts of health and illness and sexualised violence are the products of a series of negotiations involving production personnel. Underpinning the decision-making process is the constant pressure for audience ratings. This concern can sometimes override any social responsibility to present more balanced or accurate representations and can sometimes censure the images which might convey more challenging messages.

Crucial to understanding 'how soap opera works' is the recognition and examination of the often complex *negotiation* process. As we shall see in the case study material, a single soap opera story line may involve a number of personnel working throughout the organisational hierarchy. These include: script-writers, story editors, story consultants, Producers and Directors and members of senior broadcasting management such as Heads of Drama. None are autonomous. All are working under a series of competing pressures. Underpinning all of these concerns and implicit in production personnel's decisions is the key factor of audience ratings. However the extent to which these pressures come into play differs depending on the story line subject matter, values of the production staff and the wider social climate at the time of transmission.

The soap production team: A microcosm of society?

The soap industry is populated by a fairly wide cross section of men and women from different age groups, social classes and educational backgrounds. Certainly with respect to the script-writing team this is likely to be a deliberate strategy on the part of senior production staff. *Brookside's* Producer explained that production team meetings are used to generate a range of personal responses to story line material and that his role is to provoke the writers:

You try and keep the team as representative of what's going on as possible and as varied. There's no point in me having two of the same type of people in there because suddenly (the story line suggestion) goes across the room like wildfire and you've got all these different opinions. What we do is basically play devil's advocate and the best meetings are the ones where there's a fight. People are actually passionately fighting each other and that's fabulous because that's all going into the notes and the minutes of that form the nucleus of the storyline. You say "That's a lot of rubbish!" even if you believe them and play them off again. This happens with politics, sexual politics, every storyline we do and the writers all have their favourite characters and they have their own imaginations, they have their own experiences. That's the trick (18csam).

The extent to which *Brookside's* production philosophy encourages 'in fighting' and personal revelations may be considered to go beyond the usual limits of work place culture²⁹. Writers are not simply played off one and another at story conferences but are encouraged to bring all of their previous experiences into play when arguing their case - particularly on story lines involving gender

²⁹ The provocation of soap opera production personnel certainly provides a powerful point of contrast with the culture in which news media personnel work. As Philip Schlesinger observed, it was crucial to their survival that BBC journalists revealed no personal values or agendas which might be seen to compromise the 'value free' production of the news (Schlesinger 1987).

politics. Here the programme's producer explains how this works in practice with the 'date rape' plot:

It's the analyst's couch. I put them all on the analyst's couch and I say "why are you saying that?" or "what are you basing that on?" and they'll go "I've been there". "What?" Everyone goes quiet and we bring it out of them. Suddenly they say, "all right you know I've been through it". "Yeah, I thought about hitting this girl". The date rape (story line) was an amazing one because the guys were all starting to be very new men saying "woman should be allowed to say no". Suddenly my female very feminist writers were saying "she's been a stupid bastard". "She knows what she's getting into" and I went "wow, what have we got here? You couldn't have predicted that. I couldn't sit down and just think up the storyline, I didn't even know their opinion existed and suddenly you've got opinion, based on your own experiences and your own opinions but you've got twelve of them (18csam)

As the Producer continues:

We have a rule that nothing is ever said outside that room. No arguments are carried on and any personal details are forgotten about. A couple of the writers have said "I've said stuff in there that my wife doesn't know about me" (18csam)

When the *Brookside* writers were asked to reflect on the conduct of these meetings their responses added valuable insights to the producers' account, discussed above. All of the writers I spoke with agreed that the meetings were democratic, as one writer said "(You argue) until you lose your voice or your cool". However the writers were also wary of any attempt, by senior production staff, to manipulate the direction of arguments. As one Brookside writer explained "Sometimes there is a hidden agenda but you can smell it a mile off and so it tends to make you react further against it!"

It is important to remember that production personnel receive high levels of feedback about story lines. This is not simply via audience research commissioned by the programme or broadcasting channel, or press coverage written by critics but from members of their social network. One writer explained that "You listen to anyone and you're more likely to glean something from a friend or someone who you just strike up conversation with because they're the people who actually watch it as viewers. Telly critics watch it as telly critics". Another writer described how friends will often give very frank feedback on specific episodes:

A mate phoned me up a while ago as soon as the programme had finished and (said) "What was that shit line?" And it wasn't one of mine it was put in by the producer. The only line he picked out wasn't mine. Now he says "What was that shite you were writing last week? Oh yeah it wasn't yours like!" (soap opera writer).

Soap opera Producers may encourage their staff to draw upon their own personal experiences to develop fictional story lines with strong characterisations however sometimes personal experiences or beliefs can jeopardise their commitment to how a story line should develop. A very senior member of the *EastEnders* script team confided that he believed the programme did sometimes "get it wrong". The story line he referred to involved the abduction of a child. In this story, viewers saw Michelle Fowler's agonising wait for information about the disappearance of her young daughter Vicky. He explained how this story, in his opinion, sought to engage the audience at the expense of the realistic concerns of any parent:

We get it wrong when we take the easy route like the kidnap snatch with Vicky. My argument about that was that I am a father but have never had my kids snatched. If I'm just even sitting at home and my children are out late at night and they say they're going to be back at midnight and they don't come back, you immediately think they're dead and you start to worry. If they'd actually been snatched, it would have affected my entire life forever. I would never have recovered from it. I would have been

frightened every time one of them left my side. Therefore the consequences of running a storyline like that is immense. If we were being totally responsible about it the fallout on Michelle would have been, well I just don't think she would ever have been the same person again (13csam).

In fact, in this instance it would appear that audience feedback was equally critical. In a coincidence of ill timing, the fictional abduction story line was transmitted at the same time as high profile media reporting of the abduction and murder of a child named James Bulger. Two adolescent boys were responsible for the child's death and the story received both highly sentimental and deeply sensationalist treatment by British media (Franklin 1997: 3). In response to these real life events, and against a wave of public revulsion, a soap opera tale of abduction seemed completely inappropriate. The BBC was forced to transmit a 'health warning' prior to the *EastEnders* episodes - assuring viewers that the story would be resolved positively - however the story was regarded as having 'misfired' badly on the production.

Production team members therefore have their own personal barometer about the kinds of material they are committed to. For example, whereas the *EastEnders* senior consultant brought his experiences as a father to bear on the Michelle Fowler story, *Emmerdale's* Producer felt vindicated by her involvement in a lesbian story after her 'conservative parents' gave their support. As she recalls here:

My parents are good Scots Presbyterian's who live in a very narrow community and vehemently denied to me that Rock Hudson was gay, saying that I was scandal mongering. But my father actually rang me after the scene when Zoe told her father (that she was gay) and said 'That was a very good episode tonight. It was interesting and it made me think. Of course your mother and I know that these things exist but we've always turned a blind eye to it. It's out of our ken and it's made us think how difficult it must be for people who find themselves in that situation to be accepted by their family and friends'. I thought if my father

can say that, who's approaching seventy and a Scots Presbyterian, then we're making headway (12csaf).

However it is very important to note that there is a strict hierarchy in the soap production process and the writers discussed how, in the end, their personal barometer is far less important in influencing story development than that of the producer. As one writer explained "The bottom line is if (the producer) wants it changed then what are you going to do? You're not going to stand and shout over one line when the rest of the script might be to your liking and has your particular stamp on it" (11csam).

It is possible to describe the production process 'in theory' but there are often gaps between 'theory' and 'practice'. The next chapter presents the key results from the soap opera production research in case study form. This develops some of the main points which have been discussed in relation to programme identity, ethos and the team process. The case studies allow us to look at how the soap opera production process works 'in practice' and under specific circumstances.

Chapter Five: case studies of diverse social issue story lines in different soap opera programmes

INTRODUCTION

The main concern of this chapter is to examine the production context within which social issue story lines are developed. The chapter examines the ways in which institutional, organisational, commercial and regulatory pressures interconnect to inform the selection, timing and development of 'issue' story lines. Major story themes are analysed alongside interviews from production personnel who worked on developing the story lines and the perspectives of source organisations who collaborated and advised on the scripts. Each case study examines key decisions which were made by production personnel including the motivations for developing a specific story line and decisions made about casting the main characters' roles. It also explores the issues and problems encountered in bringing a social issue story 'to screen' for 'pre Watershed' audiences and the extent to which different story lines are given the soap treatment of suspense and narrative pace to maintain audience interest. The chapter identifies how the same subject can be developed very differently within different soaps and decisions made over the casting, characterisation and narrative pace contribute to the overall framing of a story line.

The first section of the chapter is a case study of how breast cancer has been treated in two soaps and examines the production priorities of *EastEnders* and *Brookside*. The second section is a case study of how child sexual abuse/sexual violence was treated in *Emmerdale* and *Brookside*. The third section presents a case study of how a mental distress story line was developed in *Coronation Street* (with reflections back to *Brookside's* characterisation of abuser 'Trevor Jordache'). The chapter concludes by comparing and contrasting the decision making process of the story lines under discussion and explores the constraints and possibilities made available in the genre of soap with reference to the different substantive areas.

THE BREAST CANCER STORIES

The first case study explores how two breast cancer story lines were developed in British soap operas during the period of my study. *Brookside* became the first major British soap opera to tackle the topic of breast cancer in 1994. However the actor who played cancer survivor Patricia Farnham left the production and the story line was left unresolved. Two years later, at the end of September 1996, *Brookside* brought back Patricia in a one week special - she had discovered another lump in her breast and without disclosing this to her ex husband, Max, (who remained a constant character within the programme) Patricia returned to Liverpool for tests. The revisiting of Patricias' breast cancer is discussed in the case study.

This *Brookside* story line (September, 1996) directly competed with a breast cancer theme in *EastEnders*, transmitted around the same time in autumn of 1996 when *EastEnders* audiences saw Peggy Mitchell disclose to her daughter in law Tiffany that she had found a lump in her breast. Peggy is reluctant to alert her GP but is finally persuaded to undergo tests. The story line culminates over Christmas (a time of intense competition between the soaps) when Peggy finally agrees to undertake a lumpectomy. The story is revisited in August 1997 when she receives an 'all-clear' from her follow up mammogram³⁰

Generating the story

The soap opera genre has long been fascinated by medical tragedy and health and illness remain a staple fare of story lines. However the process of selecting an illness for soap is influenced by production team's perceptions of their audiences. In selecting breast cancer for inclusion in *EastEnders* and *Brookside* a central concern was that the disease could be easily and quickly understood

³⁰ I have included a more detailed synopsis of these two story lines to illustrate the ways in which a social issue story develops in television soap. *Brookside* revisited Patricias' breast cancer in episodes which were broadcast over the period of just one week, however *EastEnders* developed Peggys' breast cancer story over several months, see Appendix 4.

by viewers and have a resonance with audiences. As one of the writers' explains:

If you say MS, motor neurone disease or ME - what does that mean? We would need to set up explaining a whole host of things about the disease process for people to understand. (But) you say "cancer" and the viewers say "Yes I know what you're talking about". Cancer is in the language (23bcm).

In the original breast cancer story, Patricia has a mastectomy and struggles with the psycho- social impact of the disease. Her recovery progress is made more difficult due to the constant presence of Max's first wife, Susannah who plots to drive them apart. Production staff had thought it likely that the breast cancer story line would be interwoven throughout Patricia's biography. However the actress decided to leave the production and the story remained unresolved in case she wished to return. A script writer describes here where the story picked up in 1996.

(Patricia) had a mastectomy and as far as breast cancer was concerned it was left at that. Probably those aspects of her story would have been pursued but because the actress wanted to move on (breast cancer) wasn't referred to again. When Patricia reappeared on the Close, Max was confused. Susannah had moved in at the time and she thought Patricia was coming back to get her man. In fact she was back because she had found another lump and had come for a biopsy (23bcm).

Soap opera production teams are subject to intensive lobbying by source organisations to promote positive messages. However even when dealing with a high status disease such as breast cancer, the writers deny that they are involved in making 'education' television. One writer who wished to remain anonymous cites a common ambivalence to material of this type:

At the end of the day you've got to make a programme and you've got to look at entertainment versus interest. Looking at someone

with breast cancer isn't entertaining but you can make it interesting. You can go for the extremes of drama and have people getting into dire straits and have real tragedy. You can pile on the suffering, which also seems to pile on the ratings, but I don't want to really be involved in educational TV (Soap opera writer).

The decision to revisit breast cancer in *Brookside* was initiated explicitly by the Senior Press Officer for the charity, *Breast Cancer Care*. This organisation focuses on the needs of breast cancer survivors and their families as opposed to conducting scientific research into the disease. The Senior Press Officer approached *Brookside's* Producer in February 1995 (one year prior to transmission) to suggest that it would be realistic and timely to reintroduce "Patricia" with another breast cancer "scare". Although it has become increasingly common for soap opera production teams to collaborate with source organisations, programmes regularly resist attempts to lobby for specific issue story lines. This is therefore a rare example of an issue story line being generated explicitly by a source organisation and acknowledged as such.

It was also no coincidence that the storyline was scheduled for early October. October is "Breast Cancer Awareness month" a world wide initiative in which media coverage is targeted. This certainly gave the story line an added social currency and of course meant that the charity generated publicity for their awareness strategy³¹.

The *EastEnders* breast cancer story was devised at the suggestion of a script-writer in a regular Story Conference session however the programme took expert advice on storyline visuals and development from a variety of sources. The soap genre has of course long been fascinated by medical tragedy and

³¹ Although the organisations' name was not mentioned explicitly within the fictional story line, the association was worthwhile in terms of "spin off" publicity. Thus the PR officer who had suggested the storyline was invited to take part in a Radio Four special session discussing controversial issue story lines.

there were few anticipated problems with running a breast cancer story line. As an *EastEnders* production worker explains:

A lot of illnesses do, it sounds awful, but do translate quite readily into quite strong dramatic material and everybody in the audience will have or know someone who has had that experience of going to the doctor, waiting for the results and dealing with being in hospital. It is an incredibly difficult situation (but) the whole experience whether you've been through it or not, everyone can identify with (22bcm).

The topic of breast cancer was raised as a potential *EastEnders* storyline by one of the script-writers and had, according to production staff, "been knocking about for a long time". Decisions regarding story line timing, casting and characterisation and indeed interweaving the storyline with other ongoing story lines are crucial to how the story will play for audiences. As an *EastEnders* story editor explained:

EastEnders is perceived as being an issue led show but it isn't, it's character and story led so we don't just bolt on issues willy nilly. If you haven't got the character to fulfil that storyline then it won't work. You've got to be careful to make sure that the illness actually impacts on the family dynamics and the character development (23bcm).

Casting and characterisation

Casting the role is crucial to the way in which audiences engage with a character. Central to this is the way in which the soap community is constructed with "insiders" and "outsiders". A key element of the production process is therefore whether or not to run an 'issue' story with an existing character or introduce a new one to audiences. It can be argued that soap operas take risks introducing new characters to the programme. Indeed soap producers frequently described how audiences dislike cast changes and for up to one year will commonly refer to 'that new family'. Equally, it might be

proposed that new characters are introduced to *minimise* risks. Unlike established characters they can be dispensed with if they prove too disruptive to the soap narrative. Writing principally about the difficulties of introducing homosexual characters to US soaps, Joy V. Fuqua argues that:

Conventionally, the *issue du jour* is introduced to the soap opera community (...) through the arrival of a new and oftentimes marginal or peripheral character. Soap operas deploy tentative storylines through the introduction of these marginal characters so that if the narratives prove too problematic, the new character(s) can be written off or redirected (Fuqua 1995: 200).

Certainly, all production personnel I interviewed acknowledged that 'change' within soap must be carefully managed to counteract the problems which new characters present for audiences. As one *EastEnders* source describes:

It takes about 9 months to a year for that audience to actually accept (new characters) as part of that family. To run a storyline with them doesn't have the same impact at all. To run a storyline with any of our regular characters that we've established over the years, there's an empathy and sympathy for them and therefore the audience goes with them and feels part of them. That's when you get maximum value out of a story (13csam).

In keeping with the *EastEnders* production ethos of 'organic' story lines, they chose to run their breast cancer story with 'Peggy Mitchell'. This decision conformed to soap tradition in reserving a strong role for a middle-aged matriarch and this character, played by actress Barbara Windsor, was firmly established within the programme's narrative. Peggy is pub landlady of the 'Queen Vic', around which most of *EastEnders* narrative is set. Established audiences would be familiar with Peggy's character biography - her husband had a lingering death from cancer with the consequence that she fears hospitals and is fiercely protective of two sons -the central characters, Phil and Grant.

The production team believed that 'Peggy Mitchell' should take on the breast cancer story for several reasons. She had, according to one of the production team, the 'right mentality' for this particular story theme which was about 'a woman who discovers a lump and then refuses to accept there's anything wrong'. An added factor was that in choosing 'Peggy' the programme could avoid appearing too 'issue driven' and a strong breast cancer story line could be used as a device to expand and develop her characterisation. Soap opera audiences are frequently used to anticipating "issue" story lines from clues in the characters' behaviour. The causes of breast cancer are not easily attributable to particular health risks which made the disease more attractive in soap story line terms. As an *EastEnders* production team member explains:

If you take a character who smokes and they get lung cancer that would seem too issue driven. The great thing about a character like Peggy is (her breast cancer was) quite unexpected. At the time there were lots of other issues in her life. She was a character who (audiences) had only really seen pulling pints behind the bar. Suddenly she was in a new environment in a hospital and had a huge medical crisis to go through so that allowed the character to grow and expand in many ways (22bcm)

The timing was also 'right' in terms of the overall programme narrative and the "Mitchell" family in particular. As a production worker outlines here:

(Peggy's) breast cancer also just fitted in at the time when we were doing lots of other stories that were happening around the Vic. There was a big story happening for Grant and Tiffany at the time. They'd come back and got married off screen so that was a new family dynamic. Tiffany was Grant's new wife. Phil was going through a period of remission with alcoholism so there was all that going on in her life. There was also fairly major moments going on with Peggy and George. She thought George wouldn't love her any more after she'd had the operation. We were able to then use the illness to take them on a new journey (22bcm).

In the view of the production team, the breast cancer storyline acted as a catalyst and provided a useful device, creating new dynamics and tensions amongst existing characters and developing family relationships. As the production worker continues "We're always very careful that we don't just take the illness and treat it as an issue but make sure it is always part of a much larger dynamic of characters and story situations".

The fictional biographies of Peggy and her extended family meant therefore that breast cancer could operate as a story device to develop her relationships. The characterisation of Peggy developed across previous story lines also meant that the production team could build a realistic storyline with denial as a central theme. Issues of realism also played a role in casting and developing the storyline. As a woman over 50 years "Peggy" was demographically at 'high risk' from the disease. In fact, "Peggy's" character provides one of the rare media portrayals of an older female with breast cancer. News media representations of women with breast cancer are especially skewed towards younger women with the disease (a study of breast cancer survivors in the news media revealed that 94% of newspaper profiles of non - celebrity women with breast cancer were aged under fifty years). Such stories featuring women in their 20's or 30's were seen as 'more tragic' and indeed 'more sexy' in media terms (Kitzinger and Henderson 2000). In this respect, soap operas provide older women with valued matriarchal roles and the empathy viewers establish with her can allow older women's experiences to be represented. Peggys' dilemma over how to tell her family was raised as important by source organisations:

They decided it was going to be (Peggy) and very rightly so. Bang on the right age you know perfect dramatic licence in terms of her sons that she was going to have to share this terrible news with and how would she share it. Every female would have that problem. How would you tell your children? And they followed that with her. She was exactly the right person 37bcf).

Brookside also chose to explore breast cancer with an existing character, Patricia Farnham. Patricia and her husband Max Farnham were introduced to the programme as a "yuppie" couple who could play off the more traditional

working class values of other characters. Patricia was a successful career woman and, according to the Producer, the actress had proved extremely popular with *Brookside's* loyal female audience who enjoyed her realistic portrayal of a woman struggling to juggle working and family life. The breast cancer story line was discussed originally in one of the production's bi-annual long term strategy meetings and script-writers explained that a number of factors influenced their decision to have Patricia carry the breast cancer storyline. That Patricia was relatively young (in her thirties) and that breast cancer was assumed to be perceived as a disease affecting only older women meant that viewers would be surprised and more deeply affected by this new plot twist. The thinking behind this is discussed in the following quote from a *Brookside* team member:

We decided to pick a young attractive woman who people wouldn't have the slightest inkling that breast cancer would come along for her - a successful career female. People's general view on breast cancer is 'oh female in her fifties' if say Julia Brogan (an elderly *Brookside* character) got breast cancer people would say "Oh won't that be sad". If you said Patricia's going to get it the reaction would be "Patricia!" You already know there is going to be shock value in terms of viewers (writer).

Although the subject of cancer was a potentially distressing storyline for audiences, the *EastEnders* production team believed that breast cancer would provide a 'strong' story with which many viewers could identify. However remains questionable whether "everyone" could indeed identify with this storyline as this view assumes a largely "cancer free" audience. The production priorities of using medical tragedy to develop a character were also apparent in *Brookside's* treatment of the issue. Patricia was characterised as a confident, articulate middle-class woman whose cancer journey would provide extensive scope for developing her role in the programme. The production team also certainly sought to interrupt this fictional characters 'comfortable' life with a shocking diagnosis of cancer, much in the same way as cancer would confront a real life woman with her mortality. As one of the script-writers describes:

Patricia can be nice and settled and middle-class and confident and all the rest of it but the thought of having breast cancer would terrify anybody. To go through a door with her into theatre is useful for the character and hopefully the viewers can identify with it (23bcm).

Taking audiences behind closed doors?

Soap opera production workers regularly describe the power of the genre to 'take audiences behind closed doors', showing usually private problems for example physical violence or mental break down which might not be so possible in other televisual forms such as news or documentary. However decisions about which scenes will be developed 'on screen' are clearly based on the priorities of drama. Although breast cancer is necessarily a highly medicalised story line the *EastEnders* production team chose not to portray any medical procedures in detail. Viewers watched as Peggy was called to hospital for common technical procedures in identifying breast cancer, including mammograms and fine needle aspiration. All of these procedures took place 'behind closed doors' and were not represented visually for audiences. According to production sources the decision was based upon dramatic rather than realistic grounds:

You show whatever is dramatically interesting so Peggy undressing or having needles go into her wouldn't be dramatically interesting (Anonymous source).

The production team did receive some critical feed back from women with personal experience of the disease. An *EastEnders* source explained that although the storyline topic might be based on factual reality, the soap format must condense or omit certain scenes to avoid appearing didactic because "We weren't making a documentary about what happens when you have breast cancer". As he continues:

Inevitably, there are always going to be certain elements that you can't show because you can't show everything. A lot of people

who've been through that experience themselves say 'you haven't shown this or that but we can't be an educational film. If it looks like there are things missing they're simply things we couldn't cover because of time or dramatic function (Anonymous source).

The term 'dramatic function' can of course justify the exclusion of realistic but, in the productions' view, dull, element of an issue. Dramatic pace is often at the expense of a more complex realism and simplification or omissions can be particularly distressing for those who have real life experience of the condition which is being represented (see later when sources views on the storyline are discussed). It is interesting here to contrast the perceptions of *Brookside* staff with the comments made by the *EastEnders* team member. For one *Brookside* writer a health and illness story provided the perfect opportunity to draw on public anxiety about what happens behind closed doors in hospitals. In the following quote he explains how camera techniques can enhance the dramatic potential of such scenes for audiences:

When I write things dramatically sometimes I will have a camera focus on the (theatre) door. You can make it seem massive and you see people going in and out and you're craning your neck to try and peep in. You're almost creating an expectation in the viewers' mind of "what the hell goes on the other side of there?" It's almost terrifying for a patient what goes on on the other side of a door but it's useful for the viewer. I think a (hospital) door becomes quite a frightening thing (23bcm).

However there is a powerful potential of the medium to screen 'private moments'. In this context, some of the most potent scenes in *EastEnders* breast cancer story arise from playing out the process of a woman coming to terms with her cancer diagnosis, scenes which would be unlikely in news media or even documentary. In one episode, while Peggy waits at home for her results we see her break down and lash out at Tiffany who is trying to reassure her that everything will be 'okay'. Peggy rejects Tiffanys' attempts to comfort her and screams, "What if I have got cancer? That's my death sentence. Are my sons going to have to watch me die?" Scenes such as this are important

because they provide rare opportunities to portray the cancer patient 'behaving badly' and to depict ambivalent feelings (such as denial or anger).

Language

Medical story lines can raise problems with preparing scripts. For example, with a breast cancer storyline it is important to include just enough medical jargon in scripts to maintain credibility but not to alienate lay audiences. The production team for *EastEnders* achieved this by introducing a breast care nurse to counsel and advise Peggy. This character was developed principally to translate medical terms into lay language and was believed to fulfil both dramatic and educational functions. In fact prior to undertaking research, the production team were unaware of the existence of breast care nurses and welcomed the introduction of a character who could communicate medical and scientific jargon for Peggy and the audience at home. As the story editor explains:

I thought 'Great!' because there's someone who can convey the medical jargon in laymans' terms to Peggy and that character therefore seems more interesting than the doctor because (doctors) are in and out, they have busy rounds. (Doctors) come in, spout something at you and go. We could build up the character of this nurse and her role in persuading Peggy that an operation would be the best thing for her. It also fulfils the function of being educational in that it actually tells the viewers 'This is the sort of thing that could happen to you if you went into hospital you would have a nice friendly breast care nurse there helping you through it'. We were being responsible and dramatic and fulfilling a character function as well (22bcm).

It is simply not the case however that all oncology units do have breast care nurses attached. This character gave a particularly positive message about patient choice and control over treatment options. Interestingly, it was precisely these elements of the story line- the breast care nurse and the strong positive messages about treatment options which attracted some criticism in the press

and at least one writer described the story line as having been “handled in undeniably didactic terms”.

Brookside circumvented the issue of medical language by referring to treatment in passing comments (e.g. “lots of women get lumps it could be nothing”). Partly this was due to the central storyline theme about new relationships but was also due to the dramatic requirements of soap opera which in the production teams view, work against repetition:

One of the things in a story like that which is a long runner is you don't want to repeat the scenes. Although it might be useful in some sense for new viewers that's where you have to get the distinction right between the drama and a health education video (23bcm).

The *Brookside* team were also concerned with the problem of including colloquial language in scripts. Namely how to discuss cancer of the breast in a realistic but inoffensive way. Some writers believed that the scripts should reflect gender differences in every day talk but felt constrained when faced with writing male characters lines. As one describes:

Most men don't call a breast a breast and people can become desensitised with the medical jargon. A lot of men have a great deal of difficulty saying breast so they use euphemisms. You can say 'breast cancer' because it sounds cosy but men don't say things like “she has a problem with her breast”. They are more likely to say “she's got a problem with her boobs”. Men have problems saying “nipple” and I think it's because (the word) is couched in sexuality. Up on screen I don't think the word nipple was used once. I was involved in health care and that would be common currency. If a woman was describing where the lump was in the breast she would use anatomical reference points wouldn't she? Because of British reserve everyday talk could not become everyday on screen and the people who look through scripts decide which words we can use (Brookside Writer).

Language is a key area for potential change and reflects wider social and sexual mores. For example, when *Brookside* first portrayed gay character, Gordon Collins, the programme was unable to use the word 'homosexual' in scripts. Over a period of time however as the programme developed, the word was used without any problems.

The role of suspense and narrative pace

Although production staff would agree that breast cancer is a serious topic requiring sensitive handling, the ways in which the issue was packaged for audiences is classic soap territory. The potential difficulties of playing a story line concerned with serious illness become largely subsumed in the soap 'tricks' which make unpalatable story lines pleasurable for audiences and drive the plot forward. The suspense and drama of the story was created by the technique of shared secrets. This is exemplified in *EastEnders* characters Peggy and Tiffany who develop elaborate "cover stories" to ensure that her hospital appointments remain secret. Thus in at least eight different scenarios Peggy and Tiffany are forced to invent shopping trips or dental appointments to conceal hospital consultations. Tension is not simply built for audiences in terms of Peggy's cancer (is her lump benign or malignant? Will she live or die?) but crucially in terms of her relationships (will Grant discover where she is really going? Will George suspect the truth about their relationship split?). Such devices add pathos to key scenes in Peggy's treatment path. For example, audiences know that Peggy is terrified and about to discover her biopsy results but must watch as Peggy is casually castigated by her son, Grant for pestering Tiffany to accompany her to "the dentist".

The hospital scenes are also played for narrative pace. In one episode where Peggy waits for results of her breast lump biopsy, tension builds slowly as the camera returns on at least three occasions to show Peggy still waiting, alone outside the consultation room. Just as Peggy is finally called in to the consulting room, daughter in law Tiffany arrives to lend support. As the doctor begins to tell Peggy the news the camera again cuts away, cheating audiences of the diagnostic moment. It is only when Peggy re-emerges that she herself

reveals her fate uttering the words 'I've got cancer'. The episode then cuts immediately to the *EastEnders* signature tune in a classic cliff-hanger.

Similar narrative tension is set up in the *Brookside* story with suspense resting not simply on whether Patricia's cancer has returned but whether her ex husband Max will discover her secret. Audiences prior knowledge is drawn upon as Max and Susannah make increasingly insensitive remarks about Patricia and her "playing games". Patricia makes loaded references to 'the rest of my life' 'you'll never see me again', and 'my future' which have added resonance for audiences who know Patricia's secret. However narrative pace is not always viewed positively and *Brookside's* breast cancer story line did generate some tensions between writers and production hierarchy. In particular, the decision to have an unresolved conclusion to the week long story line was criticised by some writers. The final episode in which Patricia receives the results of her biopsy but rushes out of the hospital without revealing her results to Max (or indeed the *Brookside* audience) was viewed very negatively. A *Brookside* source outlines the problem in the following quote:

It's very Brookside that you leave things open to interpretation. So if you want to bring a character back you haven't said concretely "Oh I haven't got (breast cancer)" or this is my intended plan. It's to do with the programme really but on this occasion it did irk us. It was quite a cruel thing to do really. Partly it did fit with the Pat character you know "you've got your life Max and you're not particularly interested in mine why should I give you details so that you can sleep cosily at night?" But it just seemed too bitchy
(Anonymous Source).

The issue 'on screen'

A medical issue such as breast cancer also presents some more practical challenges for soap opera. *EastEnders* production staff spoke of the problems that radical body altering surgery, such as mastectomy can present for a character who will remain in the programme long after the issue has been resolved. The problem of continuity was cited as one of the reasons why the

team decided that Peggy should have a 'less visible' lumpectomy rather than mastectomy. An *EastEnders* worker involved in the story explained that 'We have to think about costume and what it's going to look like afterwards and what we're lumbering ourselves with. I know that sounds like an awful thing to say but you have to think about that for a long term character'. The production worker also recalled continuity problems with a character in another soap who had a foot amputation 'they forgot about it once and walked around normally. They had terrible continuity problems'. Finally, however the decision to go with a lumpectomy was vindicated by research findings and viewed positively by source organisations for communicating that 'a mastectomy is not necessary in all breast cancer cases'.

The *Brookside* team found similar continuity problems in portraying a character who had undergone a mastectomy and the after effects of chemotherapy. Patricia's wardrobe had to realistically reflect that of a woman self-conscious about her body image and scenes were edited and re-shot to cater for this:

We had to do a re-shoot because Patricia was on screen in a low cut tee shirt and you could see her cleavage. Well she has only got one breast so that is a visual thing that has to have a great deal of care taken (23bcm).

The realistic portrayal of a cancer patient can also be constrained by the willingness and abilities of the actors involved. For example, a common area of concern for women who undergo cancer treatment is the potentially devastating loss of hair³². Indeed there was reportedly strong lobbying for actors in both

³² The loss of hair following chemotherapy is a major concern for women with a breast cancer diagnosis. This was remarked upon by some of the spokespeople from cancer support organisations. As one said "On our help line when women ring up that's a big thing. The big thing is losing hair. It's a terrible thing and that's what they really worry about. It would have been a good thing to be able to touch on it and I think for (Peggy) to have been mortified by that would have been much more powerful than any long drawn out radiotherapy. Barbara Windsor is so well coiffured and manicured. She may have said "I'm not having any of that" as an actress (she could) just refuse to do it.

productions to portray this very negative impact of chemotherapy. However as one anonymous soap opera production worker confided "then you're talking about contracts and what the actress will do".

Advice from outside agencies

EastEnders have on several occasions established collaborations with lobbying/campaigning groups. The production has had a long involvement with the Terence Higgins Trust with whom they liaised over character Mark Fowlers HIV diagnosis. The organisation made an agreement with the programme first, that the character should remain in the programme for a long period of time and second, that if the character was to leave it should not be presented as related to his illness (Miller 1998). Mark Fowler is indeed still 'living with HIV' in the programme however the extent to which research is undertaken and indeed used to inform a storyline may differ substantially depending on the script-writer or particular issue. *EastEnders* engaged breast cancer experts from a number of different cancer organisations and breast cancer charities to advise on story developments and read their scripts. A breast care nurse advised on technical terms. As a spokesperson for one of the charities comments:

They came to us among others and they did a lot with the Royal Marsden Hospital. (*EastEnders*) wrote the scripts, we commented on what we thought was important but for medical detail our breast cancer nurse looked through (the script) and advised and said "look there's no way". I remember some of the (problems) with wardrobe. We went through all the detail of "Would they have a stethoscope" what kind of literature they would have in the waiting room and so our literature was there. It was great our poster was up in the background when the consultant was talking to her. They were obviously trying to make it as real as possible (37bcf).

It is of course undeniable that these source organisations lack power and ultimate influence over a storyline development. Indeed while source organisations acknowledge the wide reach of soap operas, many of those I

spoke with remarked upon the ambiguous nature of any collaboration. As one senior clinician who advised upon both *Brookside* and *EastEnders* breast cancer scripts described:

What you wouldn't want is your name to be on the by-line because (soaps) then do with the story what they want. I will give the factual information but I freely acknowledge that this is not a documentary. While we would want to see our name under a Horizon programme in no way would we want to be named alongside a soap storyline because they will twist the story if it suits them and that's fine (31bcf).

The above case study has explored how breast cancer was treated in two soap operas and the production processes and dilemmas involved in bringing physical illness to the screen. The next section explores how production decisions were made around social issue story lines with a theme of sexual violence.

THE SEXUAL VIOLENCE STORIES

This second section of the chapter presents a case study of how sexual violence story lines were treated in two soaps and examines the production priorities of *Emmerdale* and *Brookside*. Here the *Brookside* story line is dealt with at more length and in more detail than the story in *Emmerdale*. The *Brookside* story attracted significant media attention and was plotted over a considerable period of time and the *Brookside* production team allowed me far greater access to members of the team than was possible with *Emmerdale*, due to the restructuring of the production team at the time³³.

In February 1993 *Brookside* introduced the 'Jordache' family. 'Mandy Jordache' is living in a safe house in Brookside Close provided by a domestic violence support organisation. She moves to the Close with her two teenage daughters 'Beth' and 'Rachel'. Viewers discover that they are in hiding from Trevor who is in prison for physically abusing his wife, Mandy. Trevor also raped his older daughter Beth but this has been concealed from Rachel. 'Trevor' is released from prison, tracks down his family and convinces his wife to take him back. Trevor resumes his violence against Mandy and rapes Rachel. In the midst of another attack, by Trevor, Mandy, in self-defence, grabs a kitchen knife, stabs and kills him. The women decide to bury the body.

Lorraine entered *Emmerdale* as the troubled teenage daughter of an existing character, Carol Nelson. Lorraine is the resident 'wild child' and in October 1992, Lorraine discloses the reason for her 'difficult' behaviour: her father had sexually abused her when she was a child. The story line portrays Lorraine as she comes to terms with her abuse. She first discloses to a supportive neighbour 'Lynne' and then tells her mother 'Carol'. Carol is now divorced from Derek and initially refuses to believe that Lorraine was sexually abused,

³³ The *Emmerdale* production team was in the process of change at the time I approached for interviews. For example, the Producer actually left the programme one week after she spoke with me about the abuse story line.

however in time she eventually supports her daughter. Lorraine comes to terms with her past through therapy and the story line is resolved when she leaves the village to begin Art College.

Generating the story

Brookside and *EastEnders* were keen to maintain audience loyalties in developing their breast cancer story lines however in complete contrast, for *Emmerdale* (now produced by Carlton UK Television) the inclusion of a sexual violence story line was part of a deliberate strategy to attract an entirely new audience. The context is very important here for in the early 1990's *Emmerdale* had begun the process of changing the programme's image from, as one production worker described, 'cosy, farming, country, slow and dozy'. As part of this strategy the programme dropped the '*Farm*' from its title, rewrote the theme tune and re-shot the title sequences. The aim was quite explicitly to signal to audiences that 'Emmerdale is not just about farming it's part of the contemporary world' (Anonymous source).

The programme had come under severe pressure to be taken off air by Thames Television but *Emmerdale*'s problem was not simply, how many people were watching but their social background and disposable income. As an *Emmerdale* source describes:

The programme had an imperative over the last few years to change its audience profile which was fairly old and a C,D,E audience with a strong basis in Yorkshire. The remit was to try to change that audience. To try to get a younger audience, a bigger audience if possible, but a younger audience and an A,B,C audience which had a greater following in London and the South East. Of course all those areas being where the money is and where advertisers are interested (Anonymous source).

Yorkshire Television also engaged the consultancy of *Brookside*'s Phil Redmond to *Emmerdale*. As a production worker described quite bluntly

Advertisers are not interested in advertising to 65 year old D and

E audiences who live mostly in Yorkshire. It's simply not of any interest to them and that's a fact of life (Anonymous source).

At the time 'Lorraine's' incest storyline followed a series of measures designed to update the show. As part of this, two Asian characters were introduced and another story line depicted the dilemma of a teenage mother who abandons her baby. The motive for introducing social controversy was, in the opinion of an *Emmerdale* source that:

Controversial stories would buck up that image and encourage people to watch who otherwise wouldn't have thought of watching *Emmerdale* (Anonymous source).

Decision-making on this particular story was fraught with commercial tensions. The imperative to introduce an incest storyline came from the very top of the organisational hierarchy according to a source:

That (child abuse) story actually came about very specifically because the Head of Programmes at YTV said that he wanted three controversial story lines (anonymous source).

Although the directive did not specify particular issues, it was important that the programme introduce a story with a young protagonist. Audiences had not yet seen new teenage character 'Lorraine Nelson' but the actress had been cast to fill the 'age gap' and filmed six months of episodes in which the Producer describes, she was cast as 'a bit troublesome, a bit of a rebel'. The team considered several ways in which 'Lorraine's' character could develop and take on a socially controversial story. Potential suggestions included a drug storyline but eventually the decision was made: Lorraine had been sexually abused. The process is described quite simply in the following quote:

Three of us were all sitting around a table, the producer, the script editor and myself and we kind of all clicked at the same time that the story would be that she had been abused (Anonymous source).

Emmerdale's Producer however presents a different account of Lorraine's story development. She proposed that Lorraine's abuse was reasonable as 'it seemed a valid story and fitted her behaviour pattern on paper' and had therefore developed out of the existing character in an organic way. The programme had utilised the character simply to broaden the age range of the *Emmerdale* cast - at that point the only members under the age of eighteen were two infants and a seven year old child.

Brookside, unlike *Emmerdale* has always been issue led, however *Brookside's* producer admits that in the mid-1980's the programme had lost touch with their audience who could see little of the reality of Conservative Britain reflected in the socially conscious soap. As he outlines in the following:

In the mid eighties I don't think we were wrapping (issues) up in good enough stories. That was when people were saying 'Brookside's lost its way' and we admitted it did, a little. I can say this because I wasn't producing then. It became issue led and not story and character led. Society was getting fed up with speeches. (Audiences) would accept them in the early eighties when we first started because the Unions were fighting back. (By mid 1980's) people's fight was knocked out of them and to hear it reflected in a drama wasn't realistic to them (15csam).

By 1990 *Brookside* was under increasing pressure to maintain fast dwindling audiences and Channel Four had begun to actively seek replacement soaps (Bellos 1994). Phil Redmond admitted that he 'killed off' two characters 'mother and child' in, as he openly describes, "a cynical ratings pulling exercise to get the show talked about" (Bellos: 1994: 24). In 1993 *Brookside* introduced a heavy storyline involving domestic violence and incest to quite cynically 'kick start waning audience interest' (Rampton 1993).

The incest/domestic violence storyline was devised in late 1991 at the biannual long term strategy meeting between executive producer, Phil Redmond and producer, Mal Young. The programme-makers aimed to highlight the plight of women who kill abusive partners. In the British legal system at the time such

women could be imprisoned without legal leniency for the years of abuse which they suffered. Although the storyline did tackle incest in conjunction with domestic violence the sexual abuse element was therefore included primarily to drive the character of Mandy Jordache to murder her abusive husband. It provided, as a *Brookside* script-writer describes: 'the impetus finally to take the knife to Trevor' (01csaf).

The initial inspiration was newspaper reports which Phil Redmond had read about the acquittal of a man who had murdered his 'nagging' wife. The impetus was to run a fictional storyline to challenge real life inequalities of the British judicial system. Balanced with this was the fact that the storyline would be innovative, and potentially novel and gripping for audiences³⁴. As one *Brookside* source explained, when the idea was first presented to the writers in a production meeting there was great excitement because:

It was something that a soap had never done. On a purely televisual level it would be very exciting to do for *Brookside* in story terms (01csaf).

The 'Jordache family' was introduced to the programme therefore as the microcosm through which complex issues around the legal definition of 'provocation' could be played out. These issues were however not fully addressed until two years later in the court case surrounding Trevor's death.

³⁴ The level of competition between soap operas is intense. To an extent soaps are simply vying with each other to produce more challenging drama. In some respects this can amount to pushing back the line on what can be shown further and further as the competition proceeds. All production personnel I interviewed were acutely aware of current story lines in other programmes. It is undeniable that this has an effect on decision-making around new characters. For example, *Coronation Street's* Producer discussing the timing of *Brookside*, *EastEnders* and *Emmerdale*' lesbian story lines, declared that as a result, 'Coronation Street will never run a lesbian storyline'. *Coronation Street* later introduced a new character named 'Hayley' who became the first transsexual to be featured in British soap.

Casting and characterisation

Emmerdale were keen to develop their incest story but the story required an actress who could handle such a heavy acting role. Production staff saw themselves as fortunate to have discovered Nicola Strong, an older actress who could however play a teenage school student convincingly. As *Emmerdale's* Producer describes:

I was really looking for an actress who was actually probably aged nineteen or twenty to play fifteen, sixteen because I felt that to be able to talk an actress through the sort of drama that was coming through the script would require someone with a bit of maturity, who also wouldn't you know, fight shy of heavy emotional scenes on the subject of child abuse (12csaf).

The 'look' of the actress was also central to the story line being convincingly played and in fact Nicola Strong did not only look younger than her years but was fairly short in stature and so could make a convincing teenager who had survived abuse. *Emmerdale* did not attempt to incorporate Lorraine's abuser, Derek into the story line. *Emmerdale's* Producer justified this on the grounds that his was a story that they did not want to tell. As she puts it "I'd decided from the word go that what we did not want to do is to have a story about child abuse and the abuser, what we were interested in is how the abuse affected the victim and the family" (12csaf). It is also worth noting that by dealing with Lorraine's abuse retrospectively the production team were spared any difficulty in interweaving an abuser into the soap community. It is possible that the programme identity was also not so firmly established and the production did not want to divide audiences.

Brookside however, introduced a new character specifically to take on the abuser role (indeed no soap has cast an existing cast member in this way) and made audience suspense the key factor when casting the role of 'Trevor Jordache'. Although the character had to be convincing for a violent and abusive role, the 'look' of the actor was crucial in maintaining audience suspense. Trevor Jordache was written specifically for actor Bryan Murray, who

was recognisable to British audiences from previous gentle comedy roles. The reason being that, according to the Producer audiences would think:

'Oh I quite like him, he's a nice guy, doesn't he usually play the nice guy?' The minute people saw (Bryan Murray) on screen he had a history and we knew we had to drive this story fast to grab the audience very quickly and keep them held onto a subject that we knew some of them might not normally want to watch (18csam).

Perceptions of audience play a central role in casting and developing scripts. A *Brookside* writer commented on the added tension provided by casting Bryan Murray. A likeable actor was chosen therefore to keep audiences guessing about future plot twists. As one *Brookside* writer explained: 'If people just see a psychopath up on the screen then they say 'Yeah, he deserves to die' as soon as he walks on screen (11csam)³⁵.

The role of suspense and narrative pace

As with breast cancer, suspense and narrative pace were central considerations in how the sexual abuse story lines were developed.

The way in which story lines are 'wrapped up' for audience consumption is central to their success. Issues are therefore introduced and then given the soap 'spin' for audiences. All of the conventions of the soap genre will be employed to engage viewers in a perhaps unpalatable storyline and then as *Brookside's* Producer says:

³⁵ I have concentrated on casting priorities around a couple of characters here but *Brookside* production personnel anticipated and indeed found potential problems with viewer responses to Mandy Jordache. The producer told me "I got letters from male and females saying 'Stupid woman no woman puts up with that she'd just leave him or she deserves it" and things like 'that's mad!' and that's what you're fighting".

If you package into that (issue) a good story with credible characters that people have sympathy for and believe in, you can start to do something with an issue that a documentary can't touch (15csam).

The story line was described as *Sleeping with the Enemy* meets *Fatal Attraction*, two popular cinema films in which sexually violent protagonists pursue the object of their attraction to the point of death. Indeed the *Brookside* production did clearly borrow elements from highly successful cinema releases to develop the story on screen. This is particularly clear in scenes where Trevor pursues Mandy and also in the 'murder' scene when Mandy stabs Trevor, he appears to be dead but suddenly rises up to lunge at her again. The conventions of cinema also played a crucial role in alerting *Brookside* viewers to Trevor's 'true' nature. In a series of episodes Trevor maintains a charming front to convince his wife that he has changed and can now be trusted. A common technical device was for the camera to remain on Trevor's face after Mandy has turned away from him. His 'look' signalled to audiences that Mandy should not allow him back to the family home. *Brookside's* producer explains how this works:

You'd see (Trevor) with his back to Mandy and you just see a look on his face, which she couldn't see and then you're setting up in the audiences mind 'Oh this fella isn't straight'. That's great because that gives a lot of tension for the audience (18csam).

An additional concern, over and above 'suspense' was that these camera techniques would build audience support for Mandy as one of the script - writers discusses "What you want for us as story tellers is to get the audience really on the side of Mandy. What we kept doing is just coming out of a scene where he tried to persuade her to do something".

Emmerdale's treatment of the issue was mainly retrospective and in that sense less obviously dramatic than *Brookside's* (where Trevor's abuse was ongoing and depicted on screen), the programme nonetheless still required dramatic pace. In order for this to work the production team decided to build a

relationship between Lorraine and another 'strong and outspoken' character Lynn and have both characters work side by side in the local wine bar so that the story could build to a dramatic disclosure for audiences. *Emmerdale's* producer explains here:

A primary concern is to get a good story which will get people watching the next day so the first cliff hanger was when Lorraine first told Lynn about her sexual abuse (12csaf).

Advice from outside agencies

Sometimes soap opera production personnel have a specific commitment to a particular storyline. For example, the researcher working on *Emmerdale's* incest story had worked with emotionally disturbed children and had contacts in the social services field. The Story Editor drew on the expertise of friends 'outside television' who specialised in family law and as *Emmerdale's* Producer describes:

We were lucky in that we had a straight line to several people who were in a position to give us a 'cross the board' view of the subject. One of the people concerned was actually a counsellor in the Yorkshire Dales so we were not only getting accurate stories, we were getting accurate stories for the area (03csaf).

Brookside's production staff were given interview material gathered by a programme researcher as well as newspaper clippings detailing the experiences of male perpetrators and female survivors of domestic violence/incest. However the extent to which these were used did differ between writers. For example, one writer described how realism can sometimes take up valuable screen time:

I just like to write from my imagination and we do have a researcher on *Brookside* who picks up any factual or technical things you've got wrong. Even then sometimes they will come and tell you something which would have to write down in about five pages and it's so boring you just forget it and go for the truth

of the feelings (01csaf).

Other interviews with *Brookside* writers revealed that the use of research is clearly linked to ideas about professionalism. Thus the notion of writing for television soap opera as being a gifted, skilled, personal and organic process does not fit with writing scenes which must include 'real life' statistics and personal testimonies. As one writer explained:

I'm not a great fan of research. I wouldn't be writing if I didn't feel I had the confidence to be able to transmit whatever it was I think people are feeling (11csam).

There were also some differences in terms of how 'research' was used to help the actors develop their roles on screen. For example, although the actress who played 'Mandy' was encouraged to speak with women who had experienced abuse from their partner, the younger actresses who played 'Beth' and 'Rachel' were actively discouraged from involving themselves in the 'research' related to their roles. The Producer believed that this type of knowledge would be reflected negatively in their performance. He explained this decision as follows, "I wanted them completely in the dark and unknowing because children like that are not full of "Hey do you know the stats on abused children?"

Sometimes however despite any amount of 'research', important elements of a character coping with a problem can be absent from a soap story line. For example, *Brookside*, included very controversial scenes in which Trevor raped his teenage daughter Rachel (although the abuse was implied rather than graphic). These scenes were transmitted at the end of April, 1993 however Rachel did not discuss her feelings about the abuse for a substantial period of time. A *Brookside* source confided that this time lapse was due to the team having simply "forgotten" about the character for some time. As this production worker recounted:

We've pretended (Rachel) is in total denial at the moment and Mandy can't face bringing it up with her because of her guilt so we can hold off until she's ready. It's an entirely false device which

luckily turns out to be psychologically true! (Anonymous source).

Indeed as we shall see in chapter seven, the characterisation of the abuse survivor 'in denial' was in fact very well received by those who worked professionally with sexual abuse survivors.

The issue on screen

British soap opera is renowned for its attention to social realism yet 'realism' is frequently subordinate to audience engaging techniques. Soap production personnel frequently justify the way in which elements of story lines might be condensed, over played or simply absent from the portrayal. The long term recovery of characters from mental trauma is rarely seen. *Emmerdale's* production team justified the decision not to portray Lorraine's therapy sessions where she addresses her sexual abuse because 'therapy' lacks 'dramatic interest. As the story editor explains: Going to therapy is not dramatically interesting. It's profoundly important but it's not actually dramatically interesting (03csaf). This perspective echoes the same concerns which were raised around the absence of medical procedures 'on screen' in Peggy Mitchell's breast cancer story.

Language

Sexually explicit scenes are also problematic and scripts were checked carefully by production teams and organisational management on both *Brookside* and *Emmerdale*. An additional issue for the *Emmerdale* team was that 'Lorraine's' incest story line screened in England at 7pm but the programme was scheduled even earlier in Scotland (5.10pm), a prime after school slot. *Emmerdale's* Story Editor gives an example of the way in which typical language of abuse might be unsuitable for audiences:

One of the lines, which I argued to keep in, because it was so common, and I was overruled, was that (Lorraine) said 'Daddy asked me to lick his ice cream'. That phrase was in a first draft version and that was taken out and seen as being too much for a

seven o'clock slot. I personally felt they toned it down a lot so you didn't really know what was happening (03csaf).

Taking audiences behind closed doors?

Brookside attempted to take audiences behind closed doors in new and challenging ways with the Jordache story, portraying often very graphic physical violence (Trevor was seen slapping, punching and kicking Mandy in several scenes and his abuse of Rachel was alluded to). However such scenes of domestic violence and incest within a pre-watershed soap opera provoked controversy. The story line attracted significant attention across a range of media outlets. Press coverage profiled forthcoming episodes which were to be censored and a number of complaints were made to the Independent Television Commission and Broadcasting Standards Council. Production teams must of course balance priorities of audience alongside broadcast regulations. The two key regulatory bodies which govern soaps are the Broadcasting Complaints Commission (a Statutory body comprising the Broadcasting Standards Council and Broadcasting Complaints Commission, merged in April 1997) and the Independent Television Commission (which from 1991, combined the Independent Broadcasting Authority and Cable Authority). These organisations exist to monitor broadcast output in terms of taste, decency, violence and investigate complaints of unfair treatment.

The ITC therefore investigated complaints from 24 viewers concerning scenes of portraying Trevor's violence against his wife (24 April to 8 May 1993). A severe formal warning was issued to Channel 4 for the use of a kitchen knife in the final murder scene (8 May 1993). It was believed that this murder weapon would be available to children and could be easily imitated, in breach of Section 1.7 of the programme Code (ITC 1993). However no complaint regarding the incest storyline was upheld. The Broadcasting Standards Council shared Channel 4's view that:

the nature of 'Brookside' in its evening placing was well-understood by the audience which had been accustomed to watching equally serious and difficult issues dramatically

presented. It took account of research work commissioned by the Council, on domestic violence which suggested that its victims were willing to confront its graphic presentation in order to convey its real nature (BSC 1993).

Additional concerns focused on the early transmission time of the Saturday omnibus repeat at 1705, a pre-dinner slot when children may watch unsupervised. In order to pre-empt outside intervention the scenes of physical violence were carefully constructed so that no punch was seen to connect. In addition a key scene in which the sexual abuse of 'Rachel Jordache' was 'suggested' was edited for the omnibus repeat at the weekend. The producer and deputy head of drama for Channel 4 viewed the scene and decided to remove a brief shot of Trevors' "bare arm" which is glimpsed when the character climbs into bed with his daughter (scene cut from episode on 1.5.93). This self-censorship was undertaken because, as *Brookside's* Producer put it "You don't want to get your head cut to ribbons the night before transmission by someone who doesn't understand the power of drama. I'd rather do the censoring myself and I'm still telling the story" (18csam)³⁶. Indeed the producer was also concerned that refusing to self-censor might mean losing the entire scene from the repeat edition³⁷. It is worth noting that senior management at Channel Four supported *Brookside's* decision to go ahead with the scene and Michael Grade personally defended the programme. *Brookside's* production team agreed that they had broken the rules 'in black and white' but not 'morally'. However the ITC continued to monitor *Brookside's* omnibus edition carefully which meant

³⁶ Despite editing the scene with Trevor and Rachel, the producer still received letters from viewers who were convinced that they had seen more. As he describes: "It's funny you still get letters from people complaining who think they've seen something and they say "That's dreadful what he was doing to that girl in bed" and we say "What did you see?" So their minds are working overtime".

³⁷ More than one *Brookside* production worker mentioned that the mother of the young actress who played Rachel Jordache was quite unhappy with the scene and there may have been additional factors which came into play here.

that the writers were forced to operate under tight restrictions for future story lines. As one disillusioned writer described:

We've had such a big fuss about the knife so we are constrained. We keep trying to push the barriers (but) it's not easy and really the thought police are out in such force at the moment (01csaf).

An additional area where it was not possible to "push the barriers" was with respect to Trevors' motivation as an abuser. According to *Brookside* sources, the Channel Four 'hierarchy' decided that it should be made clear that Trevor had abused his daughter Beth on only one occasion. This decision was made on the grounds that "if it's once it could be that Trevor had an aberration, a mental aberration. If he does it over a period of time then that's no mental aberration" (*Brookside* source). This would also of course have potentially serious repercussions for the other characters (principally Mandy). There was some concern that audiences would be unable to empathise with a woman who allowed her daughters' abuser back into the family. Whereas if raping Beth had been one incident in isolation then Mandy (and audiences) could assume that it was, as Trevor tells Beth "One weak moment". Presenting the abuse as an isolated incident also arguably removes the need to address wider debates about power structures and why some men abuse their children.

Source power?

Production decisions can certainly go against the desires of groups with a special interest in the story line. This is perhaps most strikingly illustrated if we examine the controversy which surrounded the decision to sack Anna Friel (who played Beth)³⁸. The characterisation of Beth Jordache had been praised highly

³⁸ The reasons for sacking Anna Friel remain unclear however there was some 'off the record' discussion that she had criticised production regulations which disallow actors from altering their lines in the scripts and may have been seen to assume that her acting abilities had 'made' the character. No soap opera encourages actors to view themselves as 'bigger than the programme'. *Brookside's* Producer discussed the role of actors in the programme although I wish to make it clear that he was not referring explicitly to Anna Friel. He told me: "We've

by women's organisations as a rare positive and strong survivor of sexual abuse³⁹. The actress had also become a popular television celebrity and appeared in numerous 'youth' magazines (not least because Beth and her friend, Margaret provided what has probably become the most famous British soap opera kiss⁴⁰). When *Brookside* sacked Anna Friel there was a media furore. Different newspapers announced that the character was to be "killed off" possibly murdered by 'a prison lesbian' or even 'hanged in her prison cell' (*Daily Mirror*, June 14, 1995). The *Daily Mirror* later reported that Beth would commit suicide, under the headline: '*Beth us do part*' and continued:

Beth, jailed in the body-under-the patio cliff hanger, can't face a five year sentence. Although an appeal is pending, she decides to end it all' (1995).

Street demonstrations took place outside Channel Four offices by lesbian groups (Friel's character was also a lesbian) and incest survivors⁴¹. These women challenged the decision and raised concerns over the potential negative impact that 'Beth's' screen death might have. As one spokeswoman for incest survivors told me:

Beth had portrayed this really strong survivor giving out all these

worked through many drafts, many story lines to get it right and if sometimes they just change a sentence because they feel like it it can actually change the whole sentiment of a story line and destroy it".

³⁹ The *Brookside* producer also remarked upon the number of letters received from survivors of sexual abuse who appeared to relate to 'Beth's fictional experiences: Some of (the viewers) are now in their forties and they say 'I've never told anyone, I just want you to know this, I feel that *Brookside* by putting it on screen has made me feel I'm not alone and actually it's bringing to everyone what I'm going through and I feel good about that, that someone else understands my head'..

⁴⁰ Indeed even years later, interviews with Anna Friel frequently refer back to her time in *Brookside* and "that kiss". There is even an internet 'fan' site in which the scene of Beth and Margaret kissing is replayed over and over again.

⁴¹ The *Brookside* production team saw Beth's lesbianism and sexual abuse as separate issues.

messages saying 'Look you can do something about it, you can come to terms with it, you can be strong about it'. And then all of a sudden, somebody, somewhere and I feel very insensitively, decided she would hang herself in prison so they're saying to us as survivors, 'You're always the victim, you never survive' (46csaf).

Channel 4 officials assured demonstrators that the storyline would not climax with suicide and *Brookside* audiences eventually saw 'Beth' die in prison from a heart attack (26.7.95). Despite the efforts of programme-makers her death was framed by media coverage as 'a final tragedy'. The story received front page coverage by most soap magazines (e.g. 'Beth: a wasted life' TV Quick 22-28 July, 1995; 'Why Beth had to die: There could have been a happy ending - she could even have escaped from jail. But for tragic Beth Jordache there was only one way out' (TV Times, 22-28 July, 1995)

Such coverage presented 'Beth's' death in ways which undermined all the positive strengths of the character and placed her firmly in the category of victim 'scarred for life'. The above accounts undoubtedly framed her death as a 'release' from her painful experiences and this highlights the ways in which that the availability of actors is one 'real-life' factor which can effectively influence the development of any social issue story line.

In this respect it is important also to note that technical constraints are an additional factor in relation to producing television soap opera. Although the main focus of the study is the decision making of the production team members, practical concerns not just the availability of actors but also the availability of sets, will have an influence on story line development. For example, one *Brookside* writer discussed how technical issues contribute to the many influences on the story line and must be worked in to any story, regardless of the topic: -

It's not only constraints of the Broadcasting Commission, the Watershed and actors you've got to work with but also really ridiculous things like how many locations you can have, how many

houses you can have. For example, you're only allowed to have two houses on the street at a time because there will be other shoots going on using other houses. They haven't got time to light them all. You might have a really important story to tell with say the Jordaches and you haven't got their house (01csaf).

The points which the writer makes in the quote above, do quite clearly cut across all story lines and indeed all of the soap operas discussed here. In the next section of this chapter, I present a final case study of mental distress in television soap opera and the priorities which influenced how a story line about 'erotomania' was developed in *Coronation Street*.

The mental distress stories

This section of the chapter examines the production priorities and dilemmas of soap opera personnel in developing story lines about acute mental distress. In particular the chapter explores the factors which influenced the production team from *Coronation Street* in constructing a story line about a woman, Carmel, who suffered from the mental health condition, erotomania. It is however also worth reflecting back to *Brookside's* characterisation of 'Trevor'. Although *Brookside* personnel would deny that they were in fact portraying someone who was mentally ill - believing that Trevor's behaviour was open to interpretation – audiences, wider media coverage and indeed other fictional characters in the story, certainly referred to him in that way. As we see later in chapter seven Trevor's portrayal conjured up all the images of a stereotypical psychopath for audiences. Indeed this point has been made in other research which has examined how mental distress is represented in television soaps and the impact of these representations on audiences (Philo 1996a). Trevor may have been seen 'mentally ill' partly due to the lack of motivations included in the story line for his behaviour. The *Brookside* production team had purposely left a 'gap' for his motivations. For example, the producer had resisted Trevor being a drunk for example on the grounds that he wanted to "take away his excuses". The point here is not to argue that sex abusers are motivated by mental health problems but there are interesting similarities between the two portrayals of Carmel and Trevor in terms of how they were constructed for audiences. It may therefore be possible to identify shared production values across the soaps in certain areas.

In March 1993 *Coronation Street* ran a story line in which 'Carmel' a young Irish nanny develops an erotic obsession with one of the central characters. 'Carmel' moves in with 'Gail' and 'Martin Platt' to take care of their children - the family is one of the most long established in the programme. Carmel becomes obsessed with Martin and fantasises that she is his wife and the children, her own. One evening when Gail is away Carmel slips into bed with Martin who has been drinking. She convinces him, falsely, that they slept together. The story culminates in Carmel's (false) announcement that she is pregnant with Martin's child. In dramatic scenes Gail eventually confronts her, the two women struggle physically and Carmel falls down stairs. She is taken to hospital, where we discover that she is not in fact pregnant. Carmel's grandfather arrives to explain that this is a recurring pattern, Carmel has been obsessed with married men in the past.

Generating the story

Soap opera story lines are of course frequently suggested via the regular Story conference where the Producer, Story Editor and script-writers quite simply sit around a table and discuss potential future plots. The Carmel story was suggested in one such meeting and a *Coronation Street* script writer describes the routine process here:

There are about fourteen script-writers on the programme and what happens is we have a story conference every third Monday and basically we just float ideas around the room and then it is discussed from that point on and plotted through. We are actually four months ahead with story lines (02mif).

Just as *Brookside's* Jordache story was encapsulated by reference to cinema releases so too was *Coronation Street's* Carmel story. In this case the films were *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle* and *Fatal Attraction* – both portray a family unit torn apart by a 'disturbed' and potentially violent female. The concept instantly gripped the imagination of the production team. The story line crucially conformed to the classic soap opera ingredients of high suspense and drama.

It terrified audiences who watched a 'disturbed' and manipulative woman threaten the security of a regular soap family. As the Producer describes here:

Carmel the nanny from hell, and stories like that are very strong. Where you get someone new like Carmel who introduces a catalyst into a happy family and suddenly it all sort of festers and turns bad. I mean there's a really good story. I like those better than in the old days 'a train crashes into a viaduct' (04mif).

Casting and Characterisation

Coronation Street's production team were also concerned with remarkably similar priorities to *Brookside's* in constructing the character 'Carmel' for audiences. Indeed, the *Coronation Street* team deliberately selected an actress with 'the face of an angel' to conceal, in their words, the 'underlying terror'. Fresh-faced actress Catherine Cusack was therefore cast in the part to appear 'normal' to audiences and disguise her 'true character'. A new actress was introduced to take on this role primarily to 'keep audiences guessing' for as *Coronation Street's* producer explains 'if we introduced a character we might say '(She's) got to have a secret', 'What is (her) secret?' A new character without prior history could therefore generate and maintain audience suspense. As a script-writer confirms:

It was very important in the casting to believe that (Carmel) was this home loving girl because if you did cast somebody slightly dodgy then it immediately gave it (the story twist) away (02mif).

It is instructive that priorities of viewer suspense played a central role in decision making over two characters, described by audience members as 'mad' (Philo 1996a). Both roles involved manipulative outsiders - Carmel and Trevor were both cast as Irish.

The Issue on Screen: Language and Imagery

Developing scripts in which very negative language was used to denote mental distress did not appear to be a problem. Indeed, despite this being a prime concern in developing story lines in other areas the issue of language was not raised at all by *Coronation Street* production team members. Carmel and Trevor, were constructed as unpredictable and volatile as well as highly manipulative and both were clearly referred to as having mental health problems by other characters in the soap community. Thus Trevor was described frequently as 'a nutter' and Carmel was described as 'possessed' and in need of 'a damn good psychiatrist'. Both productions deny that it was their intention to fuel existing prejudice about acute mental distress. Indeed *Brookside* staff did not view Trevor's character as necessarily 'mentally ill', preferring to blame audience responses on extensive media coverage which dubbed him 'psycho Trevor'. As the Producer states here:

We never said Trevor was mentally ill. It was the media itself putting on words like 'Psycho Trevor'. We'd set out to say we don't know what caused (his behaviour) it might be mental illness. We don't know (18csam).

No problems were anticipated with any particular scene or imagery in the Carmel story line. As we have seen, this is in marked contrast to the dilemmas which production staff recalled when producing story lines on other topics. However it may also reflect the production teams perceptions of the story lines. In *Brookside's* case, the team were more concerned with building audience fear and hate towards Trevor to legitimise Mandy's actions than developing Trevors' character and quite clearly did not see themselves as contributing to a portrayal of someone in mental distress. This may be understandable as the central story line involved commitments to other areas (e.g. domestic violence, incest). However Carmel was, from the outset constructed as someone with a mental health problem and it is all the more surprising that the production team did not appear to have a professional commitment to a mental health story. The

character of Carmel was therefore seen as providing a 'good strong story line' with the intention of gripping audiences in Gail's dilemma rather than providing a sympathetic account of a young woman in distress. Audiences were however left in doubt as to how Carmel should be perceived. In one scene Gail finally discloses her suspicions about the nanny and says "Her eyes were cold, it was like she was possessed. She means to take Martin away from me. You didn't see her eyes – she says she will stop at nothing and I believe her " (21.3.93).

The Role of Suspense and Narrative Pace

Dramatic techniques involving 'shared secrets' were heavily drawn upon in developing Carmel's story. Indeed the *Coronation Street* producer termed this soap technique, the 'Panto Syndrome'. This was particularly evident in the Carmel story line which was carefully constructed to allow viewers more information than the protagonists. Audiences knew that Carmel was not to be trusted but other characters did not. As the Producer outlines:

It's almost like 'he's behind you!' That syndrome where the audience is saying 'You fool!' Where you (the viewer) know that the author lets you into information where you see both characters' lives but they're not privy to that information (04mif).

Soap opera production teams have a powerful belief in the necessity for narrative pace and consider this a firm audience requirement. In the words of one experienced drama writer 'we must keep telling stories or risk losing momentum' and more importantly audiences (as mentioned earlier this is important not only within an episode, but to maintain audience interest from one episode to the next - so is particularly important for drama serial). For example, a soap will concentrate and condense story lines, balancing realistic time scales with viewing pleasures. *Brookside's* producer justified this by saying:

You have to remember that the audience are rather fickle and switch in and out of soaps. They also like pace or the audience

starts to think 'Oh is this still going on? So even though the audience say they like reality, they sometimes don't (15csam).

This rapid turn over of story lines can have a very negative impact on those who experience periods of distress and who see fictional characters move swiftly from illness to health. However one soap opera script - writer justified the priorities of the genre by arguing that stories are simply "concentrated in a way that's not absolutely true to get the maximum drama out of them and to get the debate seriously going about what happens in real life" (23bcm). Indeed narrative pace and the ways in which stories are developed dramatically are viewed as 'fixed' priorities for the genre. The Producer from *Brookside* denied that Trevor was constructed as a stereotypical psychopath simply to draw in audiences and yet as he comments in the following quote, a 'good' story line is not worthwhile unless there are audiences willing to watch it:

We only do this so that people can watch! That's the point. There's no point in doing this and thinking 'oh we've lost, no one's watching it' so we knew we had to make them watch it (15csam).

Advice from outside agencies

Socially realistic issue story lines generally do provoke particular challenges for production teams. The issue must be at least perceived as having been handled with 'responsibility' and 'sensitivity' in order to maintain audience credibility and bear the scrutiny of campaigning groups. Each of the soap operas discussed here, employ full time research staff yet the level of 'research' undertaken and the extent to which it might be used to inform story lines differs substantially between programme and indeed working practices of the script-writers involved. The level of outside involvement with the other story lines discussed here is in marked contrast with 'research' undertaken to develop *Coronation Street* 'Carmel's' characterisation. *Coronation Street* did not take any special advice on 'Carmel's' condition. In fact, this character was 'fleshed out' simply on the basis of a single article published in the American magazine

Vanity Fair, September 1991. As one *Coronation Street* production worker describes:

We used that article and that would really explain to you about the whole psychology of Carmel. It is a brilliant article based on a couple of case studies in America. There were loads of court cases about it and a really long trial. The actual story did come about before we heard about the article so that's not really what triggered it off, but as part of the research when we read that it really helped to bring the story line together. In the conferences as well all the writers were discussing it (02mif).

The condition 'erotomania' is incredibly rare but stories of 'obsession' and 'stalking' have long been the subject of gripping story lines in television soap opera but also of course in other forms of fiction. In *Coronation Street* Carmel becomes erotically fixated with her employer 'Martin' who works as a nurse. In reality the object of obsession is more usually of high status and not known personally to the sufferer. *Coronation Street's* Executive Producer proposed that the rarity of a condition portrayed is simply not a problem – 'if it has happened, we can do it' (04mif). It would appear that soap production personnel view themselves as exempt from 'research' if it is believed to obstruct a 'good story'. However it would be wrong to assume that this is always the case with developing mental distress story lines. The BBC attracted praise for their sensitive portrayal of Joe Wicks, a young *EastEnders* character suffering from schizophrenia (indeed the mental health campaign organisation MIND presented the programme with an award for the positive way in which this character had been developed on screen). Significantly, the characterisation was based on advice from a professional advisor to the National Schizophrenia Fellowship. Dr Adrienne Revely, later wrote of her experiences with the *EastEnders* team in the *British Medical Journal*. She writes

Advising *EastEnders* on their schizophrenia story should be highlighted in red ink on my curriculum vitae. Everyone has been impressed (...) I must really know my stuff if *EastEnders* used me as a source. Of course the downside is that every jarring nuance

of the story and every inaccuracy is laid at my door, and there have been plenty of inaccuracies (...) The basic story -Joe's initial diagnosis of psychotic depression and then the diagnosis of schizophrenia- remains true to life. I have begged for the storyline to include modern treatment with a limbic-selective antipsychotic, good response, return to normal life, followed by scenes in which Joe experiences stigma. Stigma is a key issue that we want to be aired, and of course, the very fact that there is an *EastEnders* story at all is destigmatising. Schizophrenia is the last great stigma (Revely 1997: 1560).

The point I wish to make here is that the substantive topic which forms the basis of a story line is important, so too is how the topic is positioned culturally. However an additional factor is the story that the production team want to tell, how they perceive it. It would be wrong to assume that the *Coronation Street* team developed Carmel in such a way to deliberately fuel prejudice and misconceptions about those with mental health problems. However the characters' mental illness was used to structure a story on the theme of obsession and undoubtedly fed in to existing public views about those who are mentally ill (as volatile, violent, manipulative, untrustworthy). By contrast the *EastEnders* story line with Joe Wicks, was from the outset perceived as 'doing mental illness' and was developed with care and sensitivity. Quite clearly, the consultant who represented the views of the *National Schizophrenia Fellowship* to the programme was impressed by their commitment to the issue and saw the soap story line as a positive way to challenge public misconceptions. In other words I am not arguing that television soap operas will inevitably portray mental distress negatively. However it seems clear that characters such as Carmel and Trevor regardless of the productions' intentions, became part of a wider repertoire of media images in which the mentally ill are demonised.

Those who work in television soap opera have many responsibilities, to their public, to the programme, to their professional culture. Sometimes there is a significant resistance to the levels of criticism which the soap story line attracts.

This point is neatly encapsulated in the following quotation from an established soap writer:

In the end we are drama. We're not a sociological documentary or a guide book for sociologists and although we try not to go terribly wrong we sometimes ignore the truth in favour of a good story and have to do so because well, you know, you just have to do so. If we always stuck to the absolute facts we'd have no drama (01csaf).

This perspective does raise important questions about the relationship between the production team and those who campaign around an issue. Television soap operas will not necessarily develop social issue story lines in ways which would suit source organisations. Indeed source organisations who become involved in collaborations over story lines should be made aware that production teams' working in soap opera may not necessarily share the same vision or priorities. The question of responsibility is clearly contested. Source organisations may assume that responsibility is always directed towards the 'issue' however as we have seen there are other responsibilities which must be balanced by the production team members and which have consequences for how story lines are developed.

Reflections on the production study data

There are many different factors which influence how a social issue is developed within television soap opera. The significance of these factors depends not only on the substantive topic under discussion but also the production philosophies of team members and the overall programme ethos.

The background to how an 'issue' based story line is generated proved to be extremely revealing about the soap production process. Certainly the timing of *Emmerdale* and *Brookside's* incest/sexual violence story lines may be most explicitly linked to commercial imperatives, both soaps used issue story lines (coincidentally both involved sexual violence) to signal a new direction to audiences. Indeed the incentive for developing both of these story lines came

from senior management (of the programme and of the broadcasting organisation). Although commercial imperatives are important for all soaps it is interesting that certain issues which might be expected to alienate audiences were used to effectively increase their ratings. We have also seen that social issues are however introduced into soap opera story lines for diverse reasons (to raise a characters' profile, to resonate with audiences) and by different routes (from script writers, from outside organisations lobbying the programme).

The decision making process around casting the role is extremely significant and absolutely crucial to how a story line will play for soap audiences. The 'look' and familiarity (or unfamiliarity) of an actor selected to take on a serious issue story line to a large extent are used to help structures audiences response. The decision to run a story line with an existing member of the cast or to introduce a new character to develop it also tells us a great deal about the cultural significance of an issue. In this sense, casting the breast cancer survivor from within the soap community (with well loved strong female characters) was a decision based on their knowledge of their audience. Viewers were thus invited to engage and identify with a serious illness story line in ways that simply would not be possible with a new cast member. By contrast, the unpredictable and violent Carmel and Trevor were clearly marked out as 'outsiders' in the soap community, not only unknown but with a different ethnic identity to underline their 'difference'. Both characters were brought in especially for these roles and simply left the production when the story was resolved. Whether or not such casting is coincidental it both coincides with certain stereotypes about Irish immigrants to Britain and could be used to signal their status to viewers as out with the 'British' community portrayed both in *Brookside* and *Coronation Street*. The character of Mandy, also introduced as new to the programme in the role of 'battered wife' proved difficult to integrate despite the efforts of programme makers to generate audience empathy for her position as a mother who takes back the man who sexually abused her daughter.

Other factors have been seen to be important. Not simply whether a character is unknown as opposed to 'established' but also the 'look' of an actor. Again this was a significant factor in casting Carmel, with the 'face of an angel' and Trevor,

known to British audiences from previous roles as a 'likeable guy'. The chapter also highlighted other considerations such as 'looking young', identifying how casting a teenager in the role of sexual abuse survivor may present problems.

The case studies also reveal the extent to which language and imagery present problems depends on the substantive topic. The linguistic terms which may be used to refer to sexual violence, physical or mental illness are to an extent culturally dictated. However there is little doubt that it is precisely this area in which soap operas can shift social mores. The level of care taken over medically accurate language in the breast cancer scripts reflects the commitment to the issue which can again be contrasted with the approach taken to the mental distress story. The use of pejorative language, which littered scripts referring to Carmel and Trevor might reflect everyday talk but is however unlikely to be seen or permitted with other more socially approved illnesses. The sexual content of story lines provides the production team with clear challenges in terms of legal restraints and audience sensibilities, involving senior management and regulatory boards but also undoubtedly involving judicious self-censorship on the part of soap opera Producers (reflecting their prominent position within the professional corporate culture).

The heavily regulated pre-Watershed broadcast environment in which soap opera production teams operate is an important constraint on story development. Senior management certainly played the most visible role in policing the sexual violence stories (scenes were specifically revised in line with regulations, re-shot if necessary and certainly edited and revised). The breast cancer story lines presented more practical problems of wardrobe and production staff revealed an extraordinary commitment to realism (although some aspects which might be viewed as important to source organisations such as the loss of hair are difficult to achieve. Mental illness as it was developed in the Carmel story may not command the same level of social respect and indeed is highly stigmatised. In developing the character of Carmel the production team very clearly believed themselves to be freed from the usual constraints and reflects that the team did not consider themselves to be 'doing' a mental illness story. In addition, if audience ratings are prioritised, concerns about the

accuracy of the representation can be overridden - what matters is the quest for a 'good story'.

These concerns are also related to the extent to which production teams involve outside source organisations. Indeed the levels of research undertaken or outside advice sought, may also signify the socio-cultural positioning of a substantive topic. Here again we might reflect on the absence of liaison between production team and mental health organisation in comparison with other story lines (in comparison with the counsellor engaged in advising on *Emmerdale* scripts). This suggests that some socially approved illnesses may be handled in particularly sensitive ways. The 'unrealistic' portrayal of mental distress (portraying a rare condition or developing the characters behaviour in an exaggerated way) has been frequently noted. As we have seen in the case studies above, there are more concerns than simply 'doing research'. The emphasis upon background research differs substantially from programme to programme and is often regarded as the remit solely of documentaries or 'hard' news programming. It is also at odds with the professional culture of the writers, many of whom have worked in other areas of drama and their self - perceptions as creative artists.

All soap opera story lines are driven by suspense and narrative pace and this is no less the case with more controversial or socially sensitive issues. All of the story lines discussed here were paced by cliff - hangers, suspense and narrative tension. The cancer story lines were given momentum by the shared secrecy which surrounded the womens' diagnoses and their persistent attempts to deceive those closest to them (as well as switching between scenes of Peggy receiving her diagnosis to other more mundane stories to build tension). The sexual violence story lines were similarly given added pace by dramatic disclosures and powerful imagery. The camera techniques of close ups and cut - always heightened this tension and were utilised to draw in audiences who might otherwise choose not to watch this type of material.

Although production personnel are careful that the narrative twists used in an issue like breast cancer do not compromise the overall commitment to a sensitive handling, their priorities were markedly different when dealing with

mental distress. The character of Carmel and indeed Trevor are near classic examples of how the stereotype of an unpredictable psychopath may behave - concealing their true nature behind a charming front and are clearly borrowed from a long cinematic tradition - indeed both were based closely on extremely popular cinema released films. Camera techniques were used to engender fear in viewers (Carmel's face was frequently lit from beneath, the camera lingered on Trevors' face allowing audiences to witness his knowing looks). The 'panto syndrome' where viewers know more than characters is a well tested convention and although it is apparent in all of the story lines under discussion it was maximised in the characterisations of Carmel and Trevor. Both characters were specifically written to conceal their true nature to the wider soap community thus increasing the drama for audiences when they are finally revealed. These characterisations provide powerful illustrations of how the conventions of soap opera may work against positive and more challenging portrayals of acute mental illness.

CONCLUSIONS

The production study reveals that there are many factors which influence how a social issue story line is developed in television soap opera. Members of soap opera production teams have very fixed ideas about what makes 'good television' and implicitly what audiences want to watch however they may also bring an extraordinary level of commitment to developing these stories.

The story lines which have been discussed here all come within the arena of serious social issues but there is considerable ambivalence about developing a story in line with factually based research and as we have seen, there are dilemmas about education and entertainment, research and responsibility. Writers and Producers may be keen to take on a socially important topic for altruistic or commercial reasons. Production personnel certainly frequently celebrated the power of the soap genre to engage with audiences, yet when faced with any critical response to story lines, regarded themselves as free from the responsibilities of factual media formats. If you consider here the words of Coronation Street's producer 'if it has happened we can do it' - story lines may

be inaccurate and dramatically unrepresentative. A story line such as breast cancer seems to be treated with far greater commitment than in some stories of mental distress with great care being taken over the portrayal of the cancer survivor and the type of language used. Partly this is surely due to the cultural positioning of the topic (its social integration, who it affects, or at least, is publicly known to affect). Breast cancer story lines are more likely to be criticised by high status medical organisations or well established research charities whereas irresponsible images of mental distress may provoke criticism from less powerful and socially significant service Users and their carers. In a commercially led climate, the pressures on soap opera production personnel to maintain programme positioning, audiences and advertisers are intense. Indeed the extent to which the 'organic' soap story line philosophy can be reality is surely questionable. It is however certain that team members are keen to maintain their personal integrity and production credibility with audiences (and researchers). The perceived ethos and reputation of a programme is crucial to audience acceptance of a public issue storyline. While a programme can attempt to challenge public opinion on social issues, audiences' perceptions of programme identity are crucial. Both *Emmerdale* and *Coronation* have attracted extensive negative publicity over decisions to portray 'gritty' story lines (for example on lesbianism and domestic violence). In part, criticism was directed towards the subject matter but both programmes were undeniably judged harshly for changing their original 'soft' human interest remit to pursue story lines which would attract press headlines and also implicitly, audiences. Issues are however expected and anticipated by *EastEnders* and *Brookside* viewers.

The production staff involved in bringing these issue story lines into the public domain also of course bring all of their personal experiences, ideologies, prejudices and misconceptions. However soap operas are tightly managed workplaces. While the story line is a produced by very many different people throughout the programme hierarchy, in the negotiating process some have more power than others and in any struggle over story content it is senior management who have final say. Inter-production conflicts may arise when writers believe that their personal integrity is threatened and staff turn over can be triggered by a new direction of a programme.

In identifying the different ways in which diverse issues are mediated by the soap opera production process we can see that fictional television is certainly not free from all constraints. Indeed soap operas may be under even more pressure given that these story lines are a commercially produced product. Although the genre allows audiences to literally go 'behind closed doors' and see difficult moments of illness or even physical violence, there are many socially important but 'visually dull' elements to serious issues which are deemed expendable. Ultimately it is surely the soap opera production teams vision of 'what audiences want' and the elements which are considered to constitute a 'strong story line' which provide the most powerful constraints on how social issues are treated within this format.

The next chapter reflects on the importance of genre and substantive topic and is a case study of media personnel working in other areas of television and the production context of developing programmes about mental distress.

Chapter Six: the production context of social issues in other television formats: the case study of mental distress

INTRODUCTION

The main concern in chapters four and five, has been to explore the different forces and processes operating with or upon the soap genre in the production of diverse social issue story lines. This chapter reflects upon the importance of genre comparing this to how social issues are produced and represented in other television formats such as documentaries or single dramas. In this chapter I thus take one of the substantive issues, which formed part of the soap opera case studies, mental distress, and reflect on how media personnel working in other genres discussed the process of representing this issue. The chapter illustrates that there is no necessary correlation between the quality of the representation and genre, although also highlights how certain genres may open up different possibilities. Concerns which may overlap across genre such as narrative pace, audience ratings and constraints from senior management are discussed in addition to the different issues involved in producing factual television such as 'casting' real people in television as opposed to fictional characters.

MENTAL DISTRESS IN DOCUMENTARY

Production personnel who are involved in making fictional television are keen to draw a distinction between themselves and factual 'news media'. As we have seen, a common phrase running through the interviews with soap opera production team members was 'we're not a documentary' and interviewees frequently compared the soap genre with the documentary format. This implies firstly that television fiction should be excused from the need for factual basis and secondly, that as a format 'documentary' is inarguably more concerned with presenting 'the truth'. This chapter explores the extent to which a single

substantive topic, mental distress, may be treated differently across different media formats.

Certainly the format of documentary may initially appear to be a more appropriate space for positive images of mental health. Real people with mental health problems can appear on screen telling their stories in their own words. However the production process is more complex than may first appear. The chapter identifies some problems which are specific to the documentary form and examines in turn, how the constraints of access, medical control, broadcast hierarchy, and assumptions about what constitutes 'good television' influence the ways in which mental health is represented.

Issues of 'casting' and control

Groups who campaign for more accurate representations in the area of mental health view 'access to the media' as of acute importance. For example, organisations of Users of Services, have begun to put themselves forward to speak on television and present their views. I discussed this with documentary producers and found that access to people with mental health problems is, for them, a key factor. A BBC producer outlined the problems she encountered in making a series of films with the patients of one community health team. In her view, although the filming process involved a series of compromises and negotiations it was still ultimately easier to record the experiences of people in psychiatric care than other groups of people in distress. For example, issues of privacy can be minimised by filming within a hospital environment rather than someone's home. Thus in choosing to portray this particular group, programme makers might overcome potential access problems but the resulting representation is very limited in the range of conditions and treatments which are included. As a Producer acknowledges:

The most controlled way to see someone who was mentally ill was in hospital. We could just be there. We weren't invading their privacy. We could just be there in the ward and we were there for weeks and months. (The patients) would see us around and we became part of this very weird hospital environment but it

completely skewed the sorts of people and the ways we portrayed both mental illness and the way it was treated (Documentary Producer).

Producers must balance the needs of three groups: the production crew, the medical profession and the patients. Each group has competing needs and concerns which may actively work against the aims of the others. Key issues here are access and control. Before a production team can even approach someone in psychiatric care, they must first secure the agreement of the medical staff. Here the BBC producer outlines common problems:

The most insidious (problem) is that mental health professionals protect to an unwarranted degree the privacy of their patients. They do that in the very honest belief that if the general public knew that this person had a mental health problem they would be treated less well, they would be shunned and they would be discriminated against. An awful lot of people flatly said 'No, I wouldn't feel happy allowing you anywhere near them'. There is such a medical hierarchy here that the medics by far have the greatest say and a lot of them felt for the very best of motives (that the patients should not take part) but that took away from the individuals right to decide what they wanted to do. The question wasn't even put to them (Documentary Producer).

Medical staff may even use the fear of future stigmatisation to dissuade patients from identifying themselves in a television film. One producer, who interviewed patients who had been institutionalised for many years, described how medical staff will discourage patients from 'remembering what they have been taught to forget'. As this producer explains:

The medical profession have said (to the patients) 'I wouldn't be interviewed if I were you', 'It will get worse when you go out' 'you're going to be stigmatised when you go outside'. That's a

very common one or 'I wouldn't give an interview if I were you because you don't want to remember what happened to you do you? That's all past now, you're all right now (Documentary Producer).

However all of the producers I spoke with believed these medical concerns to be unfounded. In their view, audience reaction vindicated their decision to film such interviews. As an independent producer commented:

If you let someone who has been in an institution take the risk and say 'why I was put into x institution' I know from the audience response, from people who ring the (organisation) or who write to me afterwards, that it is sympathetic to that persons point of view. It is less sympathetic to the medical system that put them there. So the stigma is transferred to the medical profession rather than the individual (Documentary Producer).

Another factor which influences 'who speaks' is the degree of 'control' which medical staff have over the hospital environment and the patients. This control can thus extend to the finished product as staff rather than the crew, decide 'who is seen' and 'when'. One BBC producer saw this as having a profound effect on the series:

In the mental health arena (the medical profession) are so used to control. They control the patients, they control the hospital environments and having a television crew there who aren't subject to your control, they are outside of it, is very threatening. So it wasn't always easy to talk to people just when you wanted to and if there hadn't been that degree of second level control going on we would have made a completely different set of programmes (Documentary Producer).

Once permission is granted from the medical professionals there is the question of gaining patients consent. Some producers I interviewed had experiences of

filming very distressed people within psychiatric wards and there were clear ethical considerations. Particularly problematic was the fact that patients who were disturbed may not fully understand the implications of giving their consent. Medical staff were acutely aware of their responsibilities as carers to protect the interests of their patients. This was an issue fraught with difficulties and severely jeopardised the level of 'control' which the production team retained over the completed programme:

When people are extremely ill they are not able to make the decisions they would make when they are not ill so it was very important that (the medical profession) had a way of controlling that. But that put huge constraints on us as programme-makers because the one thing that's very difficult is to give up editorial control because then it becomes a different piece. The only way we could get access to patients at all was to agree that they had the right to veto once they were well enough to do so
(Documentary Producer).

This veto removed power from the production crew to the medical staff who decided 'if' and 'when' their patients were 'fully compus mentis'. The veto also provided an obstacle to the content of the film which had intended to 'show very ill patients, as much as possible'.

The issue of gaining 'informed' consent is more complex than simply securing a signature on a legal document. Patients may experience black outs or simply not comprehend the full implications of giving permission. Patients may have literacy problems or be unable to understand the legal wording on forms. Techniques designed by producers to communicate the experience of being filmed, included showing the interviewee on a television monitor. One producer however saw the concept of 'informed consent' as ultimately impossible. As she says:

I would always go to great lengths to explain to someone what we're going to do (but) I think there is a limit to how successful this business of asking permission is. What are you asking their permission to do? To cut their half hour interview down to ten minutes? I think it's respecting their absolute right to say 'No I don't want to be filmed' and in that sense it serves a function but it doesn't get across the nature of the media (Documentary Producer).

The Problem of Self-Selecting Patients

Another factor raised by producers which influenced documentary accounts was that patients are 'self-selecting' which meant that the range of mental health problems was not represented. One producer believed that by this process of self-selection, the patients themselves contribute to the unbalanced picture which exists. She believed that if you are 'a chronic schizophrenic' or 'psychotic' then there is little to lose by identifying yourself on television:

Patients were very self - selective and I think this affects the image that comes across about mental health in documentary. There are only certain sorts of people who feel able to stand up and say 'I have a mental illness and this is what it means for me and here I am'. The image of mental illness is very weighted towards the very extreme end of mental illness (because) people who are seriously ill have very little to lose. We got a couple of personality disorders, some people with manic depression and they would say 'yes' to begin with but they had too much to lose by it and were too afraid of what their friends, neighbours, colleagues would say. The people who did it were almost professionally mentally ill people. The balance was definitely skewed (Documentary Producer).

This perception of course neatly transfers responsibility from the Producers themselves to the mentally ill patients. The overall framing of such

documentaries is the production companies responsibility and these 'professionally mentally ill' people provide the crew with what they consider to be 'good television'.

The role of senior management

A crucial factor which influences media accounts across factual and fictional television is the level of control, exerted by the broadcast hierarchy. Media workers are all subject to degrees of control 'from above' or as one *Casualty* writer described it 'the people upstairs'. Levels of autonomy differ between programmes but even independent producers are subject to hierarchical pressures. As one commented:

Making a documentary is not a democratic process. Even if you're an independent (producer) the money is put up by someone and at the end of the day they have the final decision. They are usually the broadcaster and I think you should never forget that (Documentary Producer).

These 'final' decisions can focus upon perceived audience needs and producers may face pressures over content, title or even the accompanying press release. Philip Elliot has identified the often uneasy relationship which exists between documentary Producers and their senior management who have budgetary and editorial control (Elliot 1992). Indeed one producer who made a factual film about a psychiatric institution outlines her negative experience of organizational hierarchy:

I think that hierarchically there are pressures to do with content. I did make one documentary where someone very senior said 'It's not shocking enough. It's just not shocking enough'. It was at a viewing and they felt I hadn't made, put it crudely, as much as I could have done of the material. So against my will it was made more shocking and one of the senior bosses said 'Look the

switchboard should be jammed after this programme, it should be absolutely jammed' and I found that very difficult. He wasn't necessarily being negative. He might have been saying 'We want outrage because this is an outrageous situation and this is why we made the documentary' but on the other hand I felt the absolute pressure to make it more shocking was questionable (Documentary Producer).

Decisions around the title of a programme are crucial because a 'sexy' title can attract previewers who in turn attract audiences. Pressure from 'above' may be brought to bear, in relation to titles of programmes simply to increase the audience 'hype'. As one source explains:

That seems of significance because the broadcasters want a title that will catch the eye of newspaper journalists and previewers. So I have had two experiences where I didn't agree at all (with the titles). I had tried very hard to make these documentaries low key because that material was so awful and peoples stories were so tragic but on the other hand I know that calling it a hyped up title does increase the hype, you probably get more previews (Producer).

The well received comedy drama '*Takin' over the Asylum*' was also re-titled in accordance with anticipated viewer reaction. Audience research found that potential viewers preferred '*Takin Over the Asylum*' to the original title '*Making Waves*'. The programme however failed to attract large audiences. The decision to alter the title was not made by the writer but between the producer and Controller for BBC2. As the producer explains here, he believes it was the subject rather than the title which was responsible for low viewing figures:

The real problem for me was that such a wonderful show was watched by such a small proportion of the television viewing audience (and) I'll take full responsibility for (changing the title)

because I was the producer. Certainly when we researched the different titles the one that we ended up with was the one that got the most positive response from the likely television viewing audience. I think there was what would appear to be at first sight a difficult subject matter and a real problem of convincing a large audience that they should conquer it (07mim)

The content of press releases to accompany future programmes is also designed to attract previewers and audiences. One documentary producer had written a press release described as 'a bit boring but accurate'. However the press department of the broadcasting institution re-wrote the press release to increase public attention. The producer concluded by saying:

Whether in the end more people watched the programme or not I don't know but the pressure to get ratings, to get people to watch these documentaries is very definitely there (Documentary Producer).

Making 'good' television

The clear need for gripping visuals is a constant concern for producers and can lead to tension with medical staff. Producers, under constant pressure to find 'televisual' moments can have their efforts blocked by medics who may veto access to distressed patients. According to media personnel there are two inherent problems. First, the medical profession lacks respect for the media profession and second, medical staff simply do not understand 'the nature of television'. One Producer clashed with medics over the filming of scenes which were considered to be particularly intrusive to patients privacy. In this Producers' view, the medical profession fail to comprehend the medium of television and the needs of audiences. As she concluded:

You are making television and you're making something which has to attract people to watch it otherwise you've failed in

everything you have tried to do and it's the nature of the beast. It has to hold people. It has to be something you switch on and you become absorbed in and the only way to do that is to use particular techniques, you have cliff-hangers (Producer).

The need for dramatic visual moments not only affects the ways in which people with mental health problems are represented when they are ill but also crucially how they are represented when they are well. Narrative concerns are not therefore confined to fictional programming. For documentary producers, the need for audience pleasing pace and structure can affect decisions about the content of their films. As a BBC Producer explains, this can be at the expense of a more balanced picture of mental illness. Here she recounts her experiences of filming in a psychiatric institution:

There are two stages I think where what you need as a programme-maker conflicts with basically what is there - one is in the filming of it and another is in the editing. You are looking for some drama. You know you need a dramatic moment and you know you need it relatively soon and you know you need a resolution. There were times where we were absolutely frantic to get a section because we knew it was an aspect that was going to be covered. Regardless of how frequently sections happen in the real world we knew it was going to work for television (Producer).

The required narrative pace is often at odds with the reality of mental ill health, where people may recover and then become ill again. In the view of some television personnel, their own perceptions of audience needs must be prioritised. One documentary producer recognised the potential for presenting misleading pictures of mental illness and 'exploiting' interviewees but then commented that: 'There is no point in making boring telly about boring people'. As she noted:

In the editing what you need to make telly work is a story. No

television programme or the sorts of documentaries we were making would have held without a story, perhaps without narrative development. Now that doesn't reflect reality. There's an awful lot of times where people were being fairly interestingly ill then getting better then more ill again so what we did in the editing was to generate narrative (Producer)

The documentary Producer is under significant pressure to produce 'stories'. As Elliot describes "These producer-directors lack the events and statements of news; they lack the contests of the sports producer; they lack the scripts and actors of drama. The documentary-maker has to make it happen, to create an art object out of a factual, free-floating reality"(Elliot 1992: 32). However the methods used to create 'reality' may contribute to a distorted picture of those in mental distress.

Portraying mental health?

This issue is of key concern to campaigning groups. One of their main complaints is that often well - intentioned portrayals of people in mental distress can fall into the 'cup of tea' syndrome. Portraying someone making a cup of tea thus symbolises normality. The criticism is that this image hardly serves to change the impression of Service Users as helpless victims. The makers of television, with their dependency on dramatic visual moments will happily feature people in crisis but when these people recover from their illness, production teams struggle to make 'good television' out of normality. One Producer argued that unless you are making a 'training piece for television' it is exceptionally difficult to visually represent mental health:

For us it was much more interesting when someone had a crisis because it was much more television than the fifth or sixth therapy session where they are talking to their worker. It just doesn't make television and the being ill process is kind of interesting for nearly all the time that someone's ill. When they start to get better it's

only interesting in bits you don't want to film it all and it was very difficult because a lot of people thought that we lost interest in them when we had to start tailing off the filming (Documentary Producer).

This comes perilously close to voyeurism in relation to the mentally ill. It also raises important ethical questions about the effect of featuring people in a way which makes them feel that television was interested in them only when they were behaving 'oddly'. Being 'well' does not apparently command the same attention:

Being well is dead boring because mostly people are much more interesting when they're ill. They just are. We tried to find seminal events but largely we would end up with them in their homes or them in the park. It's a real problem actually. There's no way we're ever going to be able to show people well because it's not good television. I mean it's good training but it's not telly. Often it is a limitation that television is a medium that we most frequently use to allow people to meet people who are mentally ill because television is a very specific medium. We don't have a mass medium which doesn't depend on being involving like having a story or some kind of structure (Documentary Producer).

In the end, budgetary constraints may also be a key factor here. There clearly are very many positive and dynamic images of mental health which could be featured rather than simply 'walking around a park' (for example those with acute mental health problems are frequently also highly creative and artistic). Organizations such as the Scottish Association for Mental Health run training programmes in areas such as new technology and computing skills, where people can very obviously be seen to be re-gaining control over their own lives. Other organizations of users of services have been formed specifically to challenge 'passive' and 'victim' focused images of mental illness.

Taking Words out of Peoples' Mouths

Producers, themselves may be personally committed to presenting more positive or sympathetic images of mental ill health but organizational pressures can over-rule this concern. For example, one Producer believed very strongly that patients should speak for themselves to balance the negative visual content of her film series. Pressure 'from above' dictated that the patients stories were given by 'voice over'. This Producer pointed out that it is only fairly recently that it has been viewed as 'politically correct' for the medium of television to give a voice to disempowered individuals and acknowledges the 'survivor / victim' dilemma as highly problematic:

It is a massive problem in this area. For example when I was making one of these films, visually some of the people looked absolutely terrible and had been absolutely wiped out by their experience of incarceration. I knew that they hadn't been wiped out by it and I would have preferred to have given them more time to speak in their words but then I was put under pressure to put their stories in the commentary. I felt that would give the impression that these people couldn't speak for themselves
(Documentary Producer)

There are clear factors which influence decision making over how interviewees stories are presented in the documentary format. Most simply, it is far quicker to paraphrase someone else's story which can be paraphrased to 'fit' with the overall programme agenda - you can make them say more or less exactly what you want them to say. Another significant concern is that the story should be made easily comprehensible for audiences. As a Producer described:

I was told more than once that either the person speaking wasn't making sense or that the audience wouldn't be able to understand. If this was the case of course you could deal with it in

subtitles - this allows the person to speak for themselves but it still takes more time than a voice-over written by someone else (Documentary Producer).

This particular producer overcame such problems by using a combination of methods. Her films did use voice-over to paraphrase the person's story but intercut this with footage of individuals telling their own stories.

Production values play a key role in decision-making here. For example, by using voice-over the film avoids being labelled as 'worthy' or being perceived as 'access television where the production does not have complete editorial control. The 'house style' of both the production company making the series and the broadcast channel will also dictate the extent to which people speak for themselves. Thus perceptions of how the audience 'wants it's information' and 'what it is capable of grasping' are used to justify the paraphrasing of personal speech. An added concern is that for the production company, the use of commentary facilitates a constant 'authority' voice for viewers. As this Producer explains further:

The more voice-over you have in proportion to the interviewees, the easier it is to transmit your own authority, easier too to remind the audience "we did this", "revealed that", put your own stamp on the film (Documentary Producer)

Problems about access and representation in media are not confined to the field of mental health but extend to other disempowered or minority groups.

However if public perceptions of people who have experienced mental distress are to change positively, it seems crucial that these individuals are allowed the space and time to speak for themselves.

Media impact on users of services

The very presence of a television production crew in a psychiatric institution can influence the behaviour of patients. The producers we interviewed were highly aware of this impact particularly with respect to some people who were severely disturbed. One Producer recalled her experience of filming four days each week within a hospital:

We were doing things that fed into their illness. Like one chap had delusions that he was paranoid and he completely felt that the hospital was out to get him and he was frightened to death and he thought he had hired this film crew to record every instance in order to keep the hospital on their toes. In some cases there were people who thought there were cameras in every room. There was one chap who thought that cameras were following him and the doctor said 'But they are!' (Documentary Producer)

Often a producer is faced with a conflict between contributing to someone's distress and making a film which has maximum visual impact. Decision making here rests entirely upon the personal integrity of the producer. One producer explains why the very subject of mental illness may present a dilemma for 'media people' in particular:

It's really hard for people who (work in) media and what you're looking for is the intensity and drama because that's what makes good television. It's incredibly hard not to get seduced by that and I actually think its far too easy to wind someone up, someone who has delusions or psychosis and you're creating something in their head. Of course for you it's great telly and there were a couple of occasions where I think we came too close to that (Documentary Producer).

Again economic restraints play a major role in such decisions. One producer outlined how the production budget determines your flexibility over such issues. A producer is unlikely to have the 'luxury' of losing valuable footage given that the majority of documentary films on mental illness must be completed within two or three weeks. As she outlines here, even if a patient is obviously 'acting up' for the cameras the piece will become part of the final product if the team are working to a tight schedule:

If I had been making that film over a limited period of time I would have had to carry on (with the interview) or at least I would have felt I had to carry on because you can't waste filming days. They are far too expensive (Documentary Producer).

On some occasions this producer did allow film to be transmitted which included someone who was obviously reacting to the cameras. The decision was taken to screen such scenes to illustrate the effect of the filming process on individuals:

One thing I don't really think we disinterred was the effect we were having on (the patients). Occasionally it comes through. In one scene one of the women is having a very manic high and you know it is just for the cameras but that was the sort of thing we wanted to keep in to say there is a level of this going on (Documentary Producer).

MENTAL DISTRESS IN THE SINGLE SERIES AND THE MEDICAL DRAMA SERIES

There are however spaces where more positive or 'realistic' representations of mental illness can occur. It is important to examine the production values which underpin these portrayals. The BBC hospital drama series *Casualty* has consistently drawn praise for producing fairly critical story lines on mental

illness⁴². To understand this it is crucial to examine the way in which *Casualty* story lines are 'worked through' from ideas stage to final draft.

Casualty places high value on background 'research'. This is not simply in terms of reading newspaper cuttings or medical journals but also includes practical experience where writers visit hospital departments to observe patients and discuss cases with medical staff. A script-editor for the programme explains this prioritising of personal research:

What is absolutely fundamental is that the writer really researches the story. At the end of the day *Casualty* is a research drama. It has to have that credibility about it. We would always encourage new writers to go to a casualty department anywhere in the country (08csaf).

Casualty writers are not only encouraged to find their own contacts in the medical or social services profession but are also supported by regular medical advisers on the programme. An experienced female writer describes her first experience of becoming involved. 'I got my first commission [for *Casualty*] and then went off and researched it in my local hospitals, Guys, Greenwich, I just spent a night and observed, watched cases, talked to the nurses' (09csaf). The programme also paid a consultancy fee to allow her to discuss a future abortion storyline with a gynaecologist.

⁴² BBC1's *Casualty* began transmission on 6th September 1986 and provided Saturday evening viewers with a radical depiction of hospital life. The programme was criticised by Tory politicians for the emphasis on the lack of NHS government funding. The series also drew criticism (from Junior Health Minister Edwina Currie amongst others) for portraying accident and emergency staff members as turning to alcohol, popping pills or smoking heavily to cope with the severe pressures of the NHS conditions. The programme agenda was described as "Combining the values of a soap, a punchy political concern, documentary reportage and the thrilling elements of fast-action disaster movies" (Kingsley 1993):12.

At an organizational level *Casualty* has regular medical advisers to the production team. Thus from the earliest stage a storyline will be checked for inaccuracies. As a script-editor outlines here, the script is from initial conception liable to be rejected if it is factually inaccurate:

We have three medical advisers so they are on hand and obviously at the (initial) stage it is very important that the medical advisers give the stories the thumbs up. Often we would have cases where a medical adviser would say 'this would never happen' so obviously we chuck the story out. Every single stage goes to a medical adviser for checks on dialogue. Once we've had all the medical notes back and the producer's notes and the script editors notes we then have a meeting with the writer and they go away and re-write again. Even when a script has been finalised there are usually changes. A doctor might say 'Well actually he wouldn't say or do that' (08csaf).

An additional factor which may influence the factual quality of scripts on other programmes is the relative ease of 'deadlines'. A *Casualty* writer saw this as a crucial factor which is often overlooked. She believes that the pressure of deadlines is less immediate for *Casualty* writers which influences the accuracy of portrayals:

The beauty of *Casualty* is the amount of freedom you have, which you have on *The Bill* also but they're putting out so much more that they have to be tighter with it. (On *Casualty*) there's quite a lot more time so you are able to rush around and find out about your subject much more (09csaf).

The role of personal experience and advice from outside agencies

Another programme which provides a useful example of more positive media portrayals is the BBC comedy drama '*Takin' Over the Asylum*'. Again, it is

possible to identify factors which clearly contributed to this. More balanced images of mental illness do not simply arise from the input of the medical profession. Personal experience of mental distress or advice from campaigning groups can also result in more accurate or balanced media portrayals. *'Takin' Over the Asylum'* was a fairly radical approach to the portrayal of mental illness and was praised by mental health service users for depicting psychiatric patients as articulate and humorous. The programme had a deliberate agenda to challenge public misconceptions of the subject. The writer herself had direct experience of mental distress and was acutely aware of the problems in this field. She also took special advice from campaigning groups on mental health. As the Producer of the programme (who later became BBC Head of Drama Series) recalls:

Although that area is regularly visited in television drama, that particular approach is not and the sheer involvement of (the writer) is very unusual. (The writer) worked closely with mental health organisations, especially SAMH, Scottish Association for Mental Health and that was an important thing (07min).

An additional factor which should be emphasised is support for a writer from within the broadcasting hierarchy. The programme's producer supported the writers aim to challenge existing perceptions of mental illness. As he outlines here:

I think the serial did an extraordinary amount for people who watched it in changing perceptions there are very few things that got the same reaction from people (with mental health problems) and who derived a complicated comfort from the programme. Donna (Franceschild) had such a strong line to the mental health organisations that I for myself trusted what she was doing. She was committed to them in a basic way (07min).

The commitment of those involved in the production and the support from within the broadcast hierarchy combined to ensure that the programme succeeded in challenging negative attitudes to psychiatric patients. This support may be rare but it does exist. An independent producer who has for many years been concerned with changing the media image of mental illness sees hierarchical support as of fundamental importance. With her two most recent films she was given this support. This meant that in terms of content she had relative autonomy to present the kind of 'low key' image that she wanted and was not 'under any pressure at all to dramatise or up the hype in terms of the material'. As she explains further:

I think there are interested people in the hierarchy in television who think that to have been institutionalised for sixty years is a quiet and terrible drama in its own right. To have a woman sit in front of a camera is as dramatic as anything that you can cobble together (Documentary Producer).

CONCLUSION AND REFLECTIONS

This chapter has identified a series of factors which may influence how the discrete topic of mental distress is represented in a range of 'non-news' television programming. The aim is to illustrate that the production process is a genre issue and more complex than might be assumed. Although the documentary format may at first appear a more appropriate space in which to portray mental distress as compared with the soap format, these production workers operate in an intense environment with their own organizational and economic pressures. In this climate, underlying assumptions about audience needs and what constitutes 'good television' with dramatic moments can subordinate other concerns and result in distorted and misleading images even to the point where mental health patients are provoked to behave badly.

Writers and producers are not autonomous - independent producers must take advice from those further up the broadcast hierarchy to ensure that the organisation will work with them again in the future. Support from within this hierarchy can ensure that more challenging portrayals of mental health are produced. Equally, as has been illustrated, organizational power structures can override the personal commitment of writers and producers to this area.

Chapter Seven: audience responses to social issues in television soap opera: the case study of sexual violence in Brookside

INTRODUCTION

In previous chapters we have seen the production factors which influence how different social issues are represented within and across different television formats (soap operas, dramas and documentary series). In this chapter the focus shifts from the television production process to address how audiences 'make sense of' social issue story lines in television soap opera. The chapter presents a case study of the sexual violence story line in the Channel Four soap opera, *Brookside*. The chapter therefore builds on chapter three, which explored the philosophies and ethos of *Brookside's* production team members and also develops chapter four, which examined the production background to the 'Jordache' story and the factors which influenced how this story of sexual and physical violence was developed. We have seen how different members of the *Brookside* production team discussed their 'imagined' audience and the ways in which 'the audience' was implicit in decisions made over story development (e.g. casting, characterisation and narrative pace). This chapter is designed to provide insights into the relationship between the production team and their audience and to examine the factors which influence how 'real' audiences respond to and 'make sense of' 'issue story lines. The chapter has been structured in three main sections. The first section discusses different audience groups reactions and responses to the topic of child sexual abuse in television soap opera. The second section explores reactions and responses to specific characterisations within the *Brookside* story (the 'abuser', the 'victims') and the third section begins to explore how a story of this type may have an influence on audiences understandings around the issue (for example, the complex emotions experienced by the abused child).

Brief Summary of the Jordache Story line

The Jordache story line was introduced in February 1993 and concluded in July 1995.

'Mandy Jordache' and her two teenage daughters 'Rachel' (14 years) and 'Beth' (17 years) are placed in a safe-house in 'Brookside Close'. Viewers learn that 'Trevor Jordache' is in prison serving a sentence for domestic violence and Beth reveals that her father sexually abused her prior to his prison sentence.

Dramatic tension focuses upon Trevor's subsequent release and his attempts to convince the family that he can be trusted to move back into the house. Beth refuses to believe that he has changed, but Rachel (who has been protected from knowing about his abusive behaviour) misses her father.

Trevor eventually charms Mandy into taking him back. He quickly resumes his violent behaviour towards his wife and after viciously beating Mandy, Trevor rapes Rachel (episode transmitted 30 April 1993). Although Rachel denies subsequently that she was sexually abused, this is signalled clearly as the crucial factor in Mandy and Beth's decision to kill Trevor. In a violent struggle Mandy stabs Trevor fatally (episode transmitted May 1993). Beth and Mandy bury Trevor's body in the garden where it lies undiscovered for two years.

In May 1995, Mandy and Beth are tried for murder and submit evidence of Trevor's abuse. Rachel persistently denies in court that her father sexually abused her. Mandy receives a life sentence for murder and Beth, five years imprisonment for conspiracy. A campaign is mobilised by the local community to free the women. Rachel recovers memories of her abuse and an appeal is lodged. Prior to the Court of Appeal hearing, Beth is found dead in her prison cell (of a mystery heart problem). In July 1995, Rachel gives evidence and describes how she was raped by Trevor. The new evidence secures Mandy's release. Mandy leaves Brookside Close to begin work for a womens' refuge.

AUDIENCE RESPONSES TO SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN TELEVISION SOAP OPERA.

In the group sessions, research participants were first asked to respond to the question 'Should the issue of child sexual abuse be portrayed in soap operas?'. The aim of this was not simply to conduct a poll of their opinions but rather to examine how people understood the issue, how they related to abuse in their own lives, and how media representations may affect them. It was also important to gauge their individual responses prior to any group discussion of the topic as a whole and in addition, posing the question allowed the group to become focused on the topic. The response to this question was overwhelmingly positive. Of the total research sample, most answered the question (n=56) and 70% (n=39) believed that the topic was appropriate for television soap opera, 5% (n=3) stated that it was not appropriate for the soap opera medium and 25% (n=14) responded that they were unsure.

Soap as reflecting 'real life'

It was striking that all of those who did have direct experience of sexual abuse (either identified as survivors or as workers in the field of sexual violence) responded positively to the issue being raised in television soap opera. Their positive responses to fictionalised accounts of sexual abuse were motivated by three distinct concerns. Firstly, that fictional story lines may help to increase public awareness of the issue; secondly, that these story lines may reduce isolation for those who are currently in an abusive situation and thirdly that portraying sexual violence would fulfil the remit of television soap opera as reflecting 'real life'. The following selection of quotes illustrate these points:

I think it is important as it will show that this really does happen.
(Male, 16, YC, regularly watches *Brookside*, no personal experience of sexual abuse)

Sexual abuse is a real life issue that should be dealt with in order to prevent preconceptions and misinformation circulating among

the public. (female, 18, PSS, sometimes watches *Brookside*, personal experience of child sexual abuse)

To let children know that it is wrong because usually the abuser will tell them it is natural or normal. (female, 17, SSS, regularly watches *Brookside*, no experience of sexual abuse)

It breaks the silence and lets women and children know that they're not alone. (female, 32, WO, regularly watches *Brookside*, experience of working with sexual abuse survivors)

It is so prevalent a crime that silence should be broken by mainstream media. (female, 46, WO, never watches *Brookside*, experience of working with sexual abuse survivors)

Brookside, like all soap operas, was seen to integrate each story line into 'everyday life'. To do this with child sexual abuse was, in itself, viewed by research participants as an important achievement. In reflecting the contours of 'real life', the soap opera can highlight the lived reality of sexual abuse. As the following quotation from one young woman encapsulates:

The thing is that the soap makes (child sexual abuse) part of everyday life which it is, so (*Brookside*) have got three stories going on at once, someone starting up the pizza place or whatever. (female, 18, regularly watches *Brookside*, PSS, no experience of sexual abuse)

Television soap opera may challenge hitherto 'hidden' problems in potentially very powerful ways. The soap opera format enables the depiction of 'everyday life' and the interweaving of different story lines (for example switching from a mundane domestic story line about starting a new business to one involving sexual violence) in the same programme may capture audiences attention in a powerful way.

The importance of reputation

Research participants who believed that child sexual abuse should be included in fictional drama also believed that *Brookside* was, among other soaps, particularly appropriate. The programme was consistently referred to as "hard-hitting" and clearly had a reputation for handling "gritty" story lines. Comments were made frequently such as "I think *Brookside* usually gets it right" (Female, University Student, US). These responses suggest that the sexual violence story line was viewed within the wider context of previous story lines which dealt with 'difficult' social problems. In particular, regular *Brookside* viewers recalled an earlier 'date-rape' story line. One school student outlines here why *Brookside* has a reputation, distinct from other soap operas:

In other soap operas they'll have a story line like someone will die and the whole community will be devastated for like, a week. Then they'll all go back to their normal lives. They'll hardly mention that character and it's really unrealistic. With *Brookside* you see the continuing effects of the fathers' abuse, the younger child starts to rebel and go against her parents and the older one turns away from men. That makes it a lot more convincing because it shows how long standing the effects are. (Female School Student, PSS)

Most participants expressed the belief that fictional portrayals could contribute to a social climate in which victims could disclose abuse without fear or shame.

The soaps do a really good job, I mean twenty years ago when (child sexual abuse) was never covered in any soaps, children were growing up, really worried, being abused, never telling anybody. Now the soaps have brought out these subjects and maybe children will see it on t.v and say 'well it's happening to her, it's happening to me' and tell somebody. (Flat mate, west End, FMW)

Brookside's story line was perceived as particularly helpful to abused children. A social worker who dealt regularly with child sexual abuse cases commented

that actually 'seeing' the abuse scenario could help children gain not only the courage but the 'language' to disclose:

(Abused) children need to have language and (Brookside) gives children the words to use. I'm not saying they would copy, but they would get an idea of what to do, who to talk to because kids are manipulated and brainwashed and bribed (Female, Social Worker, SW)

The positive portrayal of survivors was seen to challenge the self-blame experienced by some survivors. One young woman (from a general population group but who revealed that she had been sexually abused) describes it as follows:

Widespread knowledge like (Brookside) would reduce the feelings of guilt that the child would feel and, you know, 'I'm not a freak, I didn't bring that on myself'. (Female, flat-mate, West End, FMW)

Participants who worked with sexual abuse survivors expressed some caution however. Many described previous negative experiences of liaising with journalists and programme-makers in connection with their work. For this group, media attention could generate positive results 'only if (soap operas) dispel myths as opposed to perpetuating them' (Womens' Support Project Worker, WO). These workers had directly experienced the impact of television representations of sexual violence. As one professional project worker explains:

Producers should remember their responsibility because there's always calls to women's organisations after something has been on (television). It heightens awareness, or helps women name something that's happened to them. Often it does pass on information but if there's absolutely nothing to pass on then it's quite dangerous and can increase isolation. I think that often programme-makers aren't aware of the power of the media and how it influences people's lives. (Women's Support Project Worker, WO).

Television Soap Opera as Simply Entertainment

In spite of the above positive comments, there were a minority of research participants who thought sexual abuse story lines were not appropriate material for soaps. All three participants who held this view were older (aged between 53 and 66 years old) and had never watched *Brookside*. No member of this group indicated that they had personal experience of sexual abuse, although in subsequent discussion one woman recalled that she had been "accosted" by a stranger in the local park when she was a child⁴³. The reasons for thinking that soap opera should avoid such a topic related to viewing pleasures and their ideas about the soap opera genre as 'entertainment'. The following quotation comes from a woman who enjoyed 'larger than life' soap operas such as the American prime time series *Dallas* and deliberately avoided British 'gritty' soaps.

It's probably hiding my head in the sand but I like to be entertained. I know it's going on outside and I know I can read about it when I pick up any newspaper or magazine but when I'm in my living room I really want to be entertained. I don't want something that I find horrible. (Female, Retired, RP)

Other members of this group made similar comments including "I watch T.V for enjoyment. Abuse, sexual or otherwise, I would not enjoy,(female, 53, RP,

⁴³ It is worth reiterating that the groups were structured to include those who had an identifiable 'special knowledge' of the issue (survivors of sexual abuse, professionals who worked in the area such as social workers) and those who had no obvious identifiable special knowledge, in 'general population' groups. In the event, some participants in 'general population' groups revealed that they had been sexually abused (on a one page questionnaire participants were invited to give any additional information that they wished). Sexual abuse and domestic violence are of course still very difficult topics to discuss and some of the responses from those in 'general population' groups may be influenced by a prior abusive experience which was not revealed in the research session. Where possible, I have identified when participants in 'general population' groups are speaking from direct experience (knowing someone who was abused or were themselves abused).

never watches Brookside, no experience of sexual abuse) and "Soaps should be mainly light entertainment" (female, 66, RP, never watches Brookside, no experience of sexual abuse).

These group participants were from a different generation than most of the other research participants. It may be that younger people in other groups reflect an important generational difference (in how they use soap operas, their expectations of the genre and their views of appropriate methods by which to inform the public about social issues in general). However the responses of these retired women may also of course reflect their lack of direct experience of sexual violence.

Audience uncertainty

Research participants who expressed uncertainty about the inclusion of sexual violence in television soap opera did not share any characteristics in particular (aside from none having any obvious contact with the issue through personal or professional experience). These participants did view increased public awareness of sexual violence as important but believed that television soap opera may not be able to successfully balance the competing demands of 'entertainment' and 'responsibility'.

Soaps are supposed to reflect real life however as regards turning child sexual abuse into something 'entertaining' I'm not really sure (female, 25, FLT, regularly watches Brookside, no experience of sexual abuse).

It depends on how it's portrayed. (Female, 29, OW, sometimes watches Brookside, no experience of sexual abuse)

The public should be made aware but would it be interesting to watch? (Male, 17, SSS, rarely watches Brookside, no personal experience of child sexual abuse)

The issue should be dealt with as it is serious enough that it should concern everyone, on the other hand I think that the issue

may be too personal to deal with on TV. (Male, 18, PSS, never watches Brookside, no personal experience of child sexual abuse)

Reservations also focused on concern about false allegations or about loss of innocence (reservations which were also expressed by some of those who opposed fictional portrayals altogether). Some research participants were concerned that fictional representations could lead to false allegations (this opinion was not held by anyone who revealed personal experience of abuse or who worked in the field). For some participants, soap opera reflected real life 'too closely':

Do you not think it just puts something into (a child's) mind that wasn't there? Some children's imagination will run away with them and they'll make things up in their own mind to give the police a hard time to sort out truth from fiction. I think probably from television they get that sort of thing. It's different reading it in a book but when they're confronted with a soap situation, that's just like our everyday life (Retired woman, RP).

The source of the woman's response above was her daughter, a policewoman who worked with the child protection unit (and disliked this aspect of her job intensely). There are often real tensions between police and social workers in response to child abuse cases. The notion of children as 'gullible' and 'impressionable' was voiced across several 'general population' groups:

Children have got really active imaginations and you could be giving your wee sister a bath or something and you don't know what they're going to say (Female, School Student, PSS).

There was also concern about the impact of portrayals on younger children in threatening to undermine their 'innocence'. Some participants who believed that Brookside's story could raise awareness and help counter the isolation of survivors were also unwilling for their own children or siblings to watch this story line. One young woman who had praised the Jordache story line said:

My little brother's only seven and my Mum watches Brookside, he

hasn't actually asked about anything yet and I don't know how my Mum would handle it, I mean he's only seven, she'd probably just say 'That's a bad man'. He's completely innocent, it's like taking his innocence away from him. (Flatmate, West End, FMW)

The concept of childhood innocence echoed powerfully across the general population groups. As one teenager attending private school observed wistfully:

It's nice to have a childhood that's not marred by all that kind of stuff at the beginning because for the rest of your life you've got to deal with that. (Female, School Student, PSS)

People also expressed concern that 'normal' children could be harmed by fictional accounts. For example the following exchange between school students makes this distinction:

PSS1: If someone at that age was being abused then it would help if they did see (Brookside) because it would make them more able to understand that other people, were going through it as well and that it wasn't just them and it wasn't their fault and it could help them.

PSS2: But most children aren't (being abused).

PSS1: I agree. It could harm the majority of children who were having a totally normal childhood (School Students, PSS).

In 'general population' groups people also talked around the difficulties which such portrayals presented for parents:

Brookside is depending on parents telling their children (about sexual abuse) because if they didn't then there could be a lot of fear among children, they're actually pushing parents to tell children things that they might not otherwise do. (Flat mate, West End, FMW)

Some younger participants also expressed concern about the negative impact of such information on their own childhood.

When I was small my Mum used to go out on night shift and I used to crawl into my dads' bed and sleep with him. If I'd been told about sexual abuse then I'd have been scared to go in bed with my father. (Flat mate West End, FMW)

Such attitudes were common and suggest that while people agree 'in theory' that any child is at risk of abuse, there is still significant resistance to giving information about the issue. The recurring theme within those research groups without experience of sexual abuse was that information on sexual abuse may result in fear and loss of childhood innocence. The concept of childhood innocence, it would seem, may be acting as a barrier to giving children information. Such attitudes also reveal the way in which the 'innocence' of the non-abused child is contrasted with the 'corruption' of the abused child. If in reinforcing the 'innocence' of the non-abused child the abused child is conversely positioned as 'damaged' this may contribute to very negative impact on the self- image of abuse survivors.

However it might be that the novelty and 'newness' of public discussion of this issue is contributing to these responses. The persistent representation of child abuse and what to do about it is likely to result in a less concerned reaction to the possible effects on 'normal' childhood. For example, children see thousands of representations of male criminals or killers but do not assume that men are going to be the same 'in reality'.

THE NATURE OF REPRESENTATION

Debates about the manner in which television soaps should develop story lines based around child sexual abuse focused on three central dilemmas. These were as follows; a) 'realism' versus 'idealism', b) the nature of representation (in particular how acts of sexual abuse should be portrayed) and c) issues around programme makers and their need to maintain responsibility alongside delivering audiences.

Research participants were uncertain when asked if television soap opera should portray the, often negative, reality of disclosing abuse or promote what should ideally happen. This comment from a teenage boy was fairly typical:

Well it might be a good thing see for people who have been sexually abused and then if they're watching telly right and the person gets caught and everything's alright it might make them tell. (Male, Youth Club Committee Member, YC)

Personal experience was again a key factor in people's attitudes to the range of experiences which should be represented. One woman recounted that a friend had been placed in social services care by her mother (the mother had refused to stop seeing her abusive boyfriend). This personal experience had a profound impact on her views about the ways in which television soap opera should portray sexual abuse.

I'd like to think that happens, once so many billion times in which case (Brookside) wouldn't deal with it. For television the general is what you want to go for rather than the specific. We all know what people are like, you know, if (audiences) see one thing they label everything as being exactly the same. (Female, University Student, US)

Again there was an identifiable distinction between those participants in 'general population' groups and those with personal or professional experience of sexual abuse. Social workers for example, admitted that young people may be dissuaded from disclosing if there were negative repercussions shown in fictional portrayals of the issue. Yet, despite this the respondents ultimately believed that 'realism' should be the determining criteria. This is an important point and should be of key concern, certainly for programme makers. If indeed there is any suggestion that representations of the issue might lead to a reluctance to seek help then this is a repercussion which should be taken very seriously and decisions made about running a story line issue with these consequences should not be taken lightly.

All participants(including the teenage survivors of sexual abuse) were adamant that 'acts' of abuse would be inappropriate to be screened. The graphic depiction of abuse was deemed wholly inappropriate and the phrase 'the power of suggestion' was repeatedly used across the group sessions. The omission of scenes of abuse was not viewed as presenting a problem to members of a television production team. As one participants explained: "If you're a good producer or director then you can show it by other means" (Female, University Student, US). This point was also made by other participants in different group sessions and in this respect *Brookside* was praised for handling the sexual abuse scenes with caution:

You can get the point across really easily by not showing (the abuse). They did that quite well in *Brookside*. You just went 'Oh shit' every time (Trevor) started walking up those stairs. (Female, Office worker, OW)

The same view was expressed by a young woman who had been sexually abused and who found that Rachel's' abuse had been conveyed with sensitivity:

It would just be too horrible but something like (*Brookside*) was okay (Female, Teenage Survivor of Sexual Abuse).

There was however some concern that the ambiguity of a soap opera scene in which abuse was 'alluded to' might conversely cause misunderstandings, particularly for young children who were unable to contextualise what they had seen:

If you just saw father and daughter cuddling then wouldn't children think that (abuse) could just start with a cuddle? (Female, Flat Mate West End, FMW).

The soap opera format is open to accusations of sensationalism in order to increase viewer ratings. In discussion, many participants assumed (correctly) that *Brookside* had increased audience ratings as a result of tackling sexual violence. Despite the view that *Brookside* was a well-researched soap opera

participants were acutely aware of commercial imperatives. The following comments were common across all groups:

Brookside probably had really high figures that week (of the abuse) people aren't watching it for the knowledge but for the specific scene. (Female, Flat mate West End, FMW).

Soap opera audiences do have a clear understanding of the commercial imperatives within which production team members operate and soap story lines are developed, as well as the aesthetic codes which will drive any story. As one research participant explains "At the end of the day a soaps got to have high (viewing) figures and got to have cliff hangers (Male, Flat mate, East End, FME). Perhaps soap operas, more than other television genres are open to the charge of sensationalism. This is certainly a point well understood by *Brookside's* production team and which consistently threatens to influence how a controversial story line of this nature is perceived by media commentators and audiences alike.

Audience acceptance of the 'Jekyll and Hyde' abuser

The character of 'Trevor Jordache' generated great hostility within audience groups. He was framed as unpredictable, manipulative and violent. His extreme behaviour - overtly charming with neighbours while simultaneously abusive 'behind closed doors' made a striking impact on participants⁴⁴. This combination of wife beater and child sex abuser encapsulated for those audience participants who had no experience of sexual abuse/domestic violence, their notion of the archetypal 'psychopath'. The term 'psycho' was reiterated throughout these audience groups. Indeed many research

⁴⁴ 'Trevor Jordache' was described as typically representing someone suffering from schizophrenia by research participants in a study of mental distress and media. As one woman is quoted "...in Brookside that man who is the child-abuser and the wife-beater - he looks like schizophrenic - he's like a split personality, like two different people. First he gets like self-pity and he brings flowers and works his way back into the house and you could feel sorry for him, then he's a child-abuser and a wife-beater" (Philo 1996a): 96.

participants referred to the way in which 'Trevor' had the 'look of an abuser' which signified to audiences that "we all knew he was bad" (Female, University Student, US).

(Trevor) walked in the room and he had that look about him, you know? And you knew there was something not quite right about him before he even did anything. I could never understand why everybody else on the Close didn't pick up on it. He was really set up as Mr. Psycho wasn't he? You know he did so many bad things I mean he did everything didn't he? (Female, University Student, US)

The character was compared with other fictional villains. For one male teacher, 'Trevor' represented the television soap opera equivalent of the central character 'Silence of the Lambs', (Rank/Orion, 1990).

Trevor was just like 'Hannibal Lecter' (Male, Foreign Language Teacher, FLT).

'Trevor' was described by people without experience of abuse as an 'over the top' character (on the grounds that 'he did everything', abused his daughters and hit his wife). In contrast, research participants with particular knowledge about the issue praised this character for 'making the links between physical and sexual abuse' (Female, Womens Organisation Worker, WO). However the research participants who had no direct experience of sexual abuse did not necessarily seek, what would in their view have been a more realistic portrayal. There was clear ambivalence here. Some participants (who had not been abused themselves) recounted stories of 'real-life' abusers (including for example local teachers or neighbours) and spoke of their belief that abusers can be 'anyone'. The very same participants however rejected the idea of seeing a familiar established soap character take on the role of abuser in a soap. Such attitudes reveal deep fears and reflect the anxiety which surrounds sexual abuse. As one young woman explained:

(Abusers) are usually the nicest people, you would never bloody know, that's what's wrong if (Brookside) were really to deal with

issues then you would have people wandering around not being able to trust anybody. (Female, University Student, US)

Audiences were undoubtedly drawn in to the tense portrayal of 'Trevor's' return to the family. Several participants referred explicitly to the way in which production techniques were employed to frame his character for audiences. Their responses contrast the 'obvious' and 'safe' dramatic representation of the 'villain' in the soap opera with the 'unsafe' terrifying 'real-life' abuser:

That's the problem with something like (Brookside) I mean you knew your man Trevor was a psycho but in real life it's always normal people. You just look at (Trevor) the camera looks into his eyes and then 'Oh no!'. (Female, Office Worker, OW)

We saw like the look in (Trevor's) eye after they've left the room and stuff. If it's real life you don't see the look. So we're getting all this information that (Mandy, Beth and Rachel) aren't. It's quite difficult to put yourself in their position because they don't see (Trevor) round the corner and him walking down the street going "Ahah! Back in! Ahah!" (Female, University Student, US)

Audience responses indicate that people are willing 'in theory' to accept messages that abusers are not necessarily strangers, could be anyone and cannot be identified by how they look. However those without experience of abuse are simply not ready to be presented with a soap opera abuser framed as 'the man next door'. By introducing a new and short term character to the programme, *Brookside* audiences were able to dismiss Trevor as 'evil' or 'mad'. Had the abuser been cast from the existing *Brookside* pool of actors then this would have been far less easy to do. This point is made by a student in one of the research sessions:

I think in Brookside if you had found out that Max (a regular, likeable character) was abusing his little boy it might have been more valid, well not more valid but more worrying than Trevor (Female, Flat mate, East End, FME).

The obvious 'next stage' of developing sexual abuse story lines in soap opera would appear to be the casting of a 'known' character in this role. The 'ordinariness' of it is exactly what has to be challenged in real life so fictional representations are likely to develop this as a theme and then the complexity of the problem will be raised (addressing debates around 'cycle of abuse' or inter generational abuse for example). Constructing Trevor as 'villain' played on audiences knowledge of fictional genres such as the film noir in which the 'baddie' is clearly defined for audiences. As one girl said:

Before you knew he was going to do anything you suspected.

Beth talked about how she had been abused by (Trevor) and you know how you can tell who baddies are in TV programmes before you had seen him do anything? (Flat mate, East End, FME).

The scenes which research participants recalled as being particularly significant (such as when Mandy first allows Trevor back into the family home) suggest that audience pleasure was maximised when audience members were in the exclusive position of receiving more information than the key players. This confirms the *Brookside* production teams' analysis in chapter five. Audiences discovered that 'Trevor' had not changed by the 'look in his eyes' achieved by the actor's shots to camera directed 'to them' as viewers. As viewers watched 'Mandy' struggle to decide whether or not to allow 'Trevor' back into her life, the dramatic tension was enhanced for audiences by the prior knowledge that she should not.

Participants 'knew' that Trevor was 'bad' but few knew why. His motivations for perpetrating the abuse were unclear in the text. This was apparent in the sessions with the 'general population' groups. There were 'clues' given in the narrative about the motivations of other characters but 'Trevor's' abuse was unlocated in the text itself. This gap resulted in overwhelming responses to him as 'evil' 'a baddie' or simply a 'psycho'. Alternative explanations drew on popular theories such as the idea of 'cycle of violence':

I don't know, it could of been that he was abused when he was a child because quite often that's the case. People who're abused

are more likely to abuse when they're older (Male, School Student, PSS).

Other participants saw Trevor as a psychologically disturbed individual. Thus his behaviour was the result of his individual psychology (rather than abuse of power for example).

If he's not been put off by prison then that shows that it's something inside him, that's the way he is or he would stop himself. If it's not something psychological then he wouldn't do it again but that showed that that's just him, that's the way he gets his kicks (Female, Flat mate, West End, FMW).

It was almost as though he was psychologically disturbed and he beat his wife and he was a child molester (Female, University Student, US).

Many participants in the general population groups were unsure why Trevor had abused his daughters and gave answers which reflected this uncertainty. The simple idea of recidivism was common. For example "Trevor did it before, he did it to the oldest girl at just about the same age, fourteen". (Female, Office Worker, OW).

These are responses which echo the dearth of debate about the motivations of abusers in factual media. Debates rarely extend beyond the 'cycle of abuse' (Kitzinger and Skidmore 1995a) or the problem is framed as symptomatic of other social problems e.g. alcohol misuse. Participants in 'general population groups' did occasionally refer to his abuse as 'something about power?' (Female, Flat mate, East End, FME). However this explanation was invariably given by those research participants who worked with those who have been abused or who had themselves been abused. For example, in contrast with how other participants in 'general population' groups saw Trevor's behaviour (as 'over the top') a social worker praised the portrayal.

I thought (the combination of physical and sexual abuse) was very good because the whole thing was about control. The man was

very in control (Female, Social Worker for survivors of sexual abuse, TS).

Audience rejection of the 'collusive' mother

The character of 'Mandy Jordache' presented audiences with a real dilemma. Although none actually said that she 'deserved' the abuse, few of the 'general population' audience participants found her sympathetic or identified with her. A mother who allows her abusive husband return to the family and fails to protect both daughters from abuse alienated a significant number of participants who had little knowledge of either domestic violence or sexual abuse. In contrast social workers and representatives from women's organisations praised Mandy's portrayal. Their criteria differed from other groups. People in these groups remarked upon her successful representation of an abused woman, isolated in a 'safe-house' with the problems of caring for her daughters without the help of a partner. For these participants *Brookside's* story line illustrated "the pressure on this woman, how difficult it was looking after the children on her own, being in a different area, just living in fear. In a way Mandy took him back and there was less fear because she knew where he was" (Female, Women's Aid worker, WO).

In many respects 'Mandy Jordache' presented the most complex dilemma for audiences. 'Trevor Jordache' provoked unproblematic feelings of hostility and fear, 'Beth' and 'Rachel' elicited unreserved feelings of sympathy but 'Mandy' was typically described as 'weak' and 'irritating'. Participants speculated about her not informing outside agencies 'why didn't she just call the police?'. Exasperation was common across general population groups, one young woman described the character as "such a wet" (Female, Flat Mate East End, FME). In the group session with young girls who had been sexually abused, however, Mandy's passive behaviour was understood to be the result of Trevor's long term abuse. As one teenager explained "Trevor's hurt her and now she's hurt and it's affected her" (Female, Teenage Survivors of Sexual Abuse, TS). For other research participants, (who had prior knowledge of sexual abuse or domestic violence) Mandy's lack of action and passivity was

incomprehensible and seen to reflect "not the wife's indifference, but she doesn't act on what she knows" (Female, Flat mate West End, FMW).

Furthermore, for some participants, the characterisation of 'Mandy' reduced the credibility of the overall story line who simply found it 'unbelievable' that a mother would not know that her child was being abused. The following exchange occurred within the research session with school students (PSS).

PSS1: To say that you could be sexually abused with your mother just downstairs and her not know is a bit far fetched, I mean (mothers) say they don't know but they normally do.

LH: Why do you think that? Do you remember reading it or seeing it anywhere?

PSS1: Well it's your mother, you know, she knows everything about you (Male, School Student, PSS).

Mandy was not only perceived as being responsible for her childrens' abuse, but also criticised for remaining with an abusive partner. The extent of Trevor's physical violence (in several scenes Mandy was shown being punched, kicked and beaten) were also viewed by some participants as unrealistic by those people without any experience of domestic violence. These participants thought that 'no woman would remain with such a man'. As a university student explained:

I don't know anyone who's been abused but I'm not sure it's like that. I get the impression that there's women who put up with it for years and years but it's not always a daily ritual and because sometimes it happens rarely they say 'Oh that's not really him'. Whereas if you're living with someone like Trevor who did that to you every single day you could hardly come up with the argument 'That's not the Trevor that I love' Could you? (Female, University Student, US)

The problem of 'mother-blaming' is well documented in literature about abuse (Hooper 1992). It was also familiar to members of the women's agencies group.

Other people that I'd spoken to about (Brookside) at the time were saying 'Oh for goodness sake, what did she take him back for?' You know that exasperation. If you're not working in this area and you haven't experienced it there's not that tolerance. (Female, Womens Support Project worker, WO)

The character of Mandy Jordache also generated anger amongst those who saw her as representing their own mothers who had 'failed' them. A Women's Aid worker recounted how she had spoken with a woman who had been sexually abused and had "this distorted anger towards their mother".

This woman was really struggling with this anger and came in after (Brookside) were portraying about the 'collusive' mother taking him back. She said to me 'But it means nothing, just look at Brookside that's what all mothers do'. And it was really hard, it was really distressing for that woman and I'm sure for lots of women in that position because it confirmed for her that all women will take (the abuser) back. (Female, Womens Organisation, WO)

For those respondents, whose own family experience was not abusive, the portrayal of Mandy was alien to strongly held beliefs about 'motherhood'. In addition for those who did have experience of sexual abuse, her failure to protect her daughters could echo their own experience and was potentially very painful. Although audience participants who knew women in the same position found her portrayal 'realistic' other groups expressed irritation and frustration for the abused wife and mother. This is a problem for agencies which attempt to challenge 'mother-blame' in cases of incest and 'victim-blame' in cases where women live with domestic violence. Awareness campaigns such as Zero Tolerance, which deliberately target this issue have found it difficult to challenge the very negative public attitudes towards women who remain living with abusive partners or who allow them to return to the family home (Kitzinger and Hunt 1993).

Audience understandings about surviving sexual abuse

The character of 'Beth Jordache' appeared to make a powerful impact upon research participants. Participants across the groups praised her characterisation and repeatedly commented upon Beth's 'strength' and 'anger'. As one young woman said:

Beth was quite strong and she seemed to turn it into anger. I think she understood more about what was going on. Perhaps more than Rachel did. (Beth) had been through it before so she was quite determined that it wasn't going to happen again and quite protective of her sister (Female, Flat mate, West End).

Those research participants who worked in the field of sexual violence welcomed this positive character and saw her as a role model with whom young survivors of abuse could identify. The character of 'Beth' challenged negative attitudes towards victims of abuse. Indeed, the pervasive nature of negative assumptions about abuse survivors was reflected in sessions with 'general population' groups in which comments were made that 'victims' would be 'scarred for life' or may inevitably progress to becoming abusers themselves. A school student (who had not watched *Brookside's* story line) believed that:

(Sexual abuse) would have such a big effect on your life psychologically that even if you made a conscious effort you don't know what you might do (Male, School Student, PSS).

The character of Beth Jordache challenged such attitudes towards victims of abuse and as one project worker from a womens' support organisation put it:

I think Beth has shown amazing strengths in trying to protect herself, her sister and her mother, and at times appearing stronger even than her mother and taking control of things. (Female, Womens Project Worker, WO).

Audience reactions suggest that this character played a key role in conveying positive messages about survivors of abuse both to those who had experienced

sexual abuse and those people who had no prior knowledge of the topic. The stigmatisation of sexual abuse survivors is potentially very difficult to challenge however and one young woman who had watched the story line (but had no other experience of sexual abuse) reflected that Beth's ability to come to terms with her abuse was unrepresentative. The strong characterisation of the abuse 'victim' did not, in her view 'fit' with pre conceived ideas about being 'scarred for life'. As she commented:

(Beth) seemed to deal with (the abuse) quite well. She seemed to be really level headed about it, you know, saying to her sister 'It happened to me'. I don't think her character is affected by it as much as a real person would be. She seems to have got on so well (Female, flat mate, East End, FME).

The portrayal of Beths' younger sister, 'Rachel' was more complex. This character conveyed the message that abuse victims often have mixed or confused feelings towards their abusers such as denial, guilt, love and loyalty. This is a very important message and it is a measure of Brookside's impact that participants understood that despite her abuse 'Rachel still loves her Dad'. The characterisation of Rachel was commented upon within the session involving young survivors of abuse. 'Rachel's' fictionalised challenging behaviour was perceived as reflecting their own behaviour. These teenage girls described 'Rachel' as 'cheeky' and 'a wee brat'. One said 'Give her an inch and she takes a mile'. Their social worker who sat in on the session, commented on the realism of Rachel's 'difficult' behaviour saying: (Rachel's) now staying out and rebelling and having problems at school, does that ring a bell? (Social worker, Teenage Survivors, TS).

The differences in how 'Beth' and 'Rachel' came to terms with their abuse was viewed as realistic. A research participant from a general population group but who also knew people who had been sexually abused drew on this knowledge to frame the characters' behaviour:

Beth was grown up and of a different age. Younger ones don't know that (abuse is wrong). They're usually told 'I really love you

that's why I'm doing this to you'. 'Don't tell anybody it's our secret', 'if you do tell on me I'll get into a lot of trouble' so there's a whole lot of guilt. That young girls' feelings are quite typical you know.
(Female, University Student, US)

Rachel's 'state of denial' did however cause some confusion for infrequent *Brookside* viewers. Some people in general population groups doubted that 'Rachel' had indeed been sexually abused because, "It's difficult to see how Rachel could have escaped the feelings of resentment and hatred for her father that the mother and Beth had" (female, University Student, US). Soap opera audiences may, literally, switch in and out of watching a story line. Television soap opera viewing is not a seamless activity and infrequent viewers may miss vital information which contextualises the characters' behaviour. However in this instance it is interesting that, as discussed earlier, a *Brookside* source revealed that the team had simply 'forgotten' about Rachel. It would appear that the absence of Rachel discussing her fathers' abuse communicated the realistic confusion which is experienced by the sexually abused child.

The sexual abuse survivor tends to be under represented in media portrayals of sexual violence. Partly, the lack of the survivors 'voice' is due to legal restrictions which influence how news media report on the topic. Audiences responses to these fictional characterisations suggest that this is a key area in which the form of television soap opera may be progressive. The strong and positive characterisation of *Brookside's* Beth Jordache has been raised spontaneously in other studies about media coverage of child sexual abuse. It is worth reflecting upon the following quote, from a 16 year old young woman who was sexually abused by her step-father:

Victims (of sexual abuse) on TV, they're like a big shadow, all blacked out. That makes me feel terrible. I thought 'I'm going to grow up and I'm going to be scared of everything'. But Beth she's so strong, she's got a grip of everything. Before that everything I saw seemed to say that if you were abused you'd be strange, different, keep yourself in a wee corner. Watching Beth has really helped me (Kitzinger and Skidmore 1995a).

Audience responses to killing Trevor

It is rare that fictional accounts of child sexual abuse portray the killing of an abuser⁴⁵. Participants expressed guilty pleasure particularly for the episodes which climaxed in 'Trevor's' death. The story line development clearly gripped *Brookside* viewers as one woman commented, "It sounds terrible but it was a story that you actually sat down to watch" (Female, Flat Mate, East End, FME). Research participants expressed great pleasure in viewing the build up to Trevors' death and the production teams' use of classic soap opera narrative techniques to build audience tension. The following selection of quotations reflect the sheer pleasure with which audiences watched the story line denouement:

I was frightened when I was watching it. See when (Trevor) jumped up and he wasn't dead, I was like that, jumping in my seat and all that. See when (Mandy) did stab him I was just waiting for him to jump up again (Male, Youth Club Committee Member, YC).

I found (Trevor) evil. The way he treated his family and the way he kept coming back to life, they just couldn't get rid of him. (Female, Flat mate, East End, FME).

I remember when they buried the body in the garden I kept being frightened to look out the window (laughs) in the middle of

⁴⁵ The story line received further media attention when a young woman was allegedly inspired by fictional events in *Brookside* to kill her abusive grand-father. Press coverage framed the case as a 'copycat' murder. Like 'Beth Jordache', her motivation was to protect a younger sister from also being sexually abused. The story was reported in the following newspapers: Judge's pity for Brookside Killer: Abused Teenager Took Cue From TV Murder (Daily Mail, July 19, 1995); Girl Copied TV To Kill Evil Grandad (Daily Mirror, July 19, 1995); Brookside Copycat Girl Kills Grandad (Daily Star, July 19, 1995); Reports included an interview with a police officer involved in the case who stated that the woman had been, 'clearly influenced by what she saw in the television series. We found entries in her diary about the (Brookside) plot and newspaper cuttings in her bedroom about victims of child abuse taking their revenge' Daily Mail, July 19, 1995).

suburbia! (Female, Office Worker, OW).

Clearly, the framing of 'Trevors' character was crucial to audiences acceptance of this act. Participants in both 'general population' and 'special knowledge' groups expressed delight at Mandy's actions:

I would have done the exact same thing if I'd been in (Mandy's) shoes (Female, Youth Club Committee Member, YC).

The compelling thing was what was going to be the pay back for this man and his behaviour so I equally was delighted when they killed him (Psychologist, Teenage Survivors of Sexual Abuse, TS).

The story line appeared, at least for some research participants, to have conveyed that Mandy had simply no alternative course of action:

It showed that legal justice isn't any form of effective justice. (Female, Flat Mate, East End, FME)

Despite the pleasure which viewers gained from watching the abused wife finally take action, this culmination of a previously well-handled storyline was described as having 'undone the good work' which had been achieved by earlier episodes.

I think it's a shame that they did that because it seems so far fetched and everything else they did was quite true to life. (Female, Flat Mate, West End, FMW)

I mean Brookside had a good storyline going and they completely ruined it by doing what they did. (Female, Office Worker, OW).

By killing him and burying him in the back garden for me it just wrote off all the good parts (Womens Support Project Worker, WO).

The session with teenage survivors revealed that for at least one participant, the murder had in fact provided an incentive to watch the story line:

I was reading about (Brookside) and I read that (Mandy) was going to murder him with her daughter and I started watching. (Teenage Survivor of Sexual Abuse, TS).

For these research participants, the killing of an abuser in a prime-time television soap opera fulfilled 'revenge fantasies'. None of the teenage girls expressed doubt that 'Mandy' had 'done the right thing' as the following exchange illustrates:

TS1: I would've done the same as well

TS2: If you ask me (abusers) shouldn't have a chance to live.

TS3: They done bad and as soon as they get out they do it over and over again

TS2: (Soaps) should either have (abusers) going to jail for life, not getting back out or getting murdered or something

TS3: or molested

TS2: Yeah, something like that happening

However in groups which did not share this experience of sexual abuse, the killing of 'Trevor' was assumed to have only negative effects on those people in a similar position to Beth and Mandy. As one young person said:

I can see why they did it but if people are in that situation then obviously they can't do what (Beth and Mandy) did. (Brookside) didn't show a way out of it, show (Trevor) getting better or anything and he'd gone into prison and come out just the same (Female, Flat Mate, West End, FMW).

Audience understandings of complex emotions

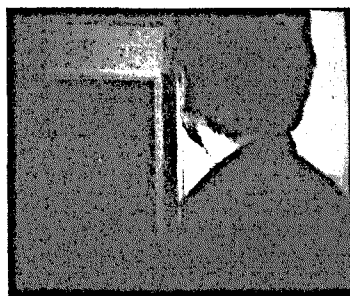
There were some clear differences between the audience groups in how they responded to the different characterisations of the 'Jordache' family and certain elements of the story line development. As we have seen, prior experience or

knowledge of sexual violence was a key factor in how research participants understood and identified with the characters. In this next section, I begin to explore the influence of the television soap opera story line on research participants and focus not upon what audiences bring to their viewing experience (in terms of pre existing knowledge, gender or social class) but what audiences might 'take away' from their viewing experience.

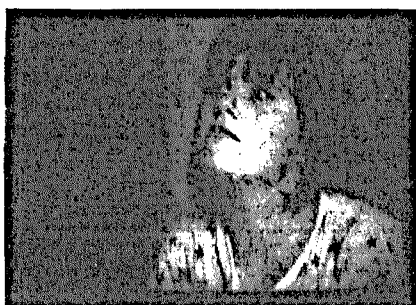
The potential for television soap opera to communicate complex emotions was revealed in the results of the 'script writing exercise' used during the group sessions. Participants were given a set of still photographs taken from a key scene in which Trevor sexually abuses his daughter Rachel and asked to produce dialogue to match the photographs. The photographs are of the scene transmitted originally, Channel 4, 30th April 1993. *Brookside* audiences saw Trevor violently beat his wife and then go upstairs to enter his daughter Rachel's' bedroom. He asks for a cuddle and climbs into bed with her. There is no graphic depiction of abuse. Beth returns home to find that Trevor has beaten Mandy. In concern for Rachel's safety Beth runs upstairs, opens her sisters' bedroom door and discovers her father in bed. A shot of the silent horror on Beth's face conveys to audiences her realisation that Trevor has sexually assaulted her sister. The following morning Beth and Mandy attempt to reassure Rachel who is withdrawn and uncommunicative.



Trevor goes upstairs



Trevor stands outside Rachel's room



Rachel listens to her father



Beth runs upstairs



Next morning

Script writing photographs used in focus groups

It is instructive to compare the dialogue which appeared in the actual episode and the scripts which were produced by research participants in the group sessions. The dialogue below is taken from the episode screened Channel 4, 30th April 1993.

What viewers saw: Channel Four, 30 April 1993

Trevor climbs the stairs, lingers briefly outside his daughters bedroom door and then enters the room. Rachel looks up sleepily.

Trevor: Rachel? It's okay

Rachel: Is Mum okay?

Trevor: She's fine, she's asleep. I'm cold are you going to warm me up eh?

Just give me a cuddle like you used to. You lie down, there's a good girl. I used to lie awake in prison wishing you could give me a cuddle

Rachel: Did you?

Trevor: Hundreds and hundreds of times, hundreds and hundreds of times.

The following morning Beth and Mandy face Rachel who is withdrawn and uncommunicative.

Mandy: He won't do anything more to you, I'm sorry I wasn't there to stop him

Rachel: He didn't do anything, he's my Dad

Beth: Rachel, listen, I know what happened because he did the same to me before he went to prison but what you've got to understand is none of it's your fault

Rachel: I didn't want him to be like that, I trusted him, he said he needed a cuddle

Mandy: Now don't you worry. Mummy won't let him touch you again, ever.

This can be compared to the scripts which were produced by different research participants in the group sessions.

Example 1: Private school students, PSS

Research session conducted 10 June 1994

Thirteen months after the original episode was transmitted

Trevor: Hello darling

(whispered, confidential tones, secretive)

Trevor: 'I'm really cold tonight...Why don't you give your daddy a cuddle?

(Moves closer, lifts edge of duvet)

Rachel: 'OK'

(apprehensive, slightly afraid although naive, trustful, and accepting. Doesn't realise full implications of event)

Panic rises within daughter, mutters

Beth: 'Please don't let him be in there with her'

Approaches tentatively with fear of discerning her father in bedroom

Guilt in mother Mandy: 'How could I have let this happen to them?'

Beth: 'He can't hurt her again, we're here now. You'll be OK'.

Rachel: confused, hurt that father has betrayed her...Disbelief

'Why did this happen to me? Is it my fault? Will I ever feel the same again?'

Example 2: State school students (SSS)

Research Session conducted 15 March 1994

Eleven months after original episode was transmitted

As Trevor makes his way up the stairs he only has one thing on his mind.

The result will be stealing his younger daughter's childhood - we could imagine what his thoughts would say

Maybe he has a conscience as he stops outside Rachel's' room

Rachel is surprised to see her Dad

Rachel: 'Dad what are you doing here?'

Trevor: 'It's all right, I'm lonely and a wee bit cold, give your dad a cuddle'

Beth: 'Oh my God, I hate him, please no, I'll kill him'

Rachel is confused and thinks: 'How could my Mum let him do this to me?'

Beth: 'He did it to me too, don't worry we'll never let him do it again'

Mandy doesn't know what to say, she feels helpless and feels she let it happen and maybe could have stopped him

There are striking similarities between these scripts which were produced by audience participants and the original dialogue. The scripts closely replicate key phrases used by 'Trevor' to gain access to his daughters' bed ('I'm really cold tonight, Why don't you give your daddy a cuddle?/ "I'm lonely and a wee bit cold, give your dad a cuddle'). The scripts also address the possible effects of abuse on 'Rachel' ('Will I ever feel the same again?/ 'The result will be stealing his daughters childhood') and reproduce 'Beth's fear and feelings of protectiveness towards her sister. (Please don't let him be in there with her'; 'Oh my God, I hate him, please no, I'll kill him'). The research participant scripts explore the role of 'Mandy' as 'collusive' mother (Mandy doesn't know what to say, she feels helpless and feels she let it happen and maybe could have stopped him/ Guilt in mother 'How could I have let this happen to them?') and replicate the dialogue of 'Beth' and 'Mandy' who reassure 'Rachel' the following morning ('He did it to me too, don't worry we'll never let him do it again'/ 'He can't hurt her again, we're here now. You'll be OK'.)

The similarities between viewers reproductions of such themes and the actual broadcast dialogue are all the more striking when you examine the scripts produced by those who had no knowledge of the *Brookside* story. The following script was invented by a group who had no prior knowledge of the actual story line.

Example 3: Retired group (RP)

Research Session conducted 6 October 1993

5 months after the original episode was transmitted

Father making way up to bedroom, reaches bedroom door, daughter looking scared

Younger daughter: Please don't touch me, I don't like it

Older daughter: What are you doing in there daddy?

Younger daughter: Go on tell Mum what has been happening

Mother: I don't believe it

Father, when confronted says 'This is nonsense, I wouldn't do anything like that'

This script contained key differences from others. The difficulties of a child preventing abuse were not addressed in any respect, the unsupportive response of the mother was not problematised; the abuser is confronted by the family and flatly denies the abuse. This account of abuse lacks the complexity and emotion of the other scripts. It is simplistic in its framing of the child's ability to prevent abuse and her subsequent insistence that her mother should be told. There is no space given to 'denial' or mixed emotions experienced by the child towards her abusive father or unsupportive mother. Scripts based upon prior knowledge of *Brookside* described 'Rachel' s emotions as 'confused', 'hurt', 'naive' and 'trustful', a mix of competing feelings rather than simply 'scared'.

This exercise shows that those participants who had watched the unfolding *Brookside* story line retained key phrases and were able to reproduce dialogue with ease. In addition to a close replication of the actual scene the scripts also addressed complex family dynamics. The relationship between abuser/victim, mother/daughters, and older/younger sister were all explored. It is remarkable that research participants were able to reproduce such similar dialogue to the original episode given that the research was conducted at least eleven months after the original episode was screened.

CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS ON KEY RESULTS

The results of the audience study reveal that social issue story lines in television soap opera may have an important influence on public understandings. The audience research reveals that *Brookside* was successful in communicating important, often complex, messages about the issue for audiences with no other experience of abuse. Indeed, for some of the 'general population' group participants *Brookside* was the first time that they had watched a television programme about the topic, suggesting at the very least that soap operas have the potential to bring social issues to different audiences. Television soap operas also communicate messages in different ways (from news media for example). Key moments in the Jordache story line, such as 'Trevor's rape of 'Rachel', when audiences were literally taken 'behind closed doors' to the moment of abuse, made a profound and lasting impact upon research participants. Research participants could recall imagery and reproduce dialogue from the scene almost verbatim, many months after the episodes' original transmission.

The potential of the soap genre to portray the complexity of abuse 'victims' coming to terms with their abuse over time, may be particularly important. Certainly, for those who had themselves been sexually abused, the characterisation of 'Beth' and 'Rachel' as positive survivors rather than 'hidden victims' provided crucial figures with whom it was possible to identify.

The sexual violence story line provided an important opportunity to tackle pervasive myths about abuse and was, in this respect, welcomed by those with personal or professional experience in the field. However the study also identified important differences between some groups (depending on their own experiences) and also highlights potential gaps between the intention of producers and responses by audiences. For example, 'Mandy's perceived failure to protect her daughters from abuse and herself from physical violence was viewed as 'collusion'. This would suggest that *Brookside* was successful in confronting some myths around 'victim blame', but not others. In particular the lack of empathy and frustration expressed towards the character of 'Mandy

Jordache' identified within general population groups reflects the power of negative assumptions about 'collusive' mothers. It is also important to note that research participants who rejected 'Mandy' as a sympathetic character did not do so on the grounds of having 'misunderstood' or 'misread' the intended message. These participants understood that Mandy had been constructed (by *Brookside's* production team) as deserving of audience empathy, however they rejected this message.

There were other key differences in audience reception of specific themes and characters in *Brookside*. Participants with no special knowledge of the issue perceived 'Trevor' as representing a 'mentally ill' deviant. In contrast, those with experience of the issue saw 'Trevors' abusive behaviour as motivated by the desire for power and wish to control his family. In particular, the combined physical and sexual abuse perpetrated by 'Trevor Jordache' was perceived as unrealistic and exaggerated. By contrast, those who had experience of working with abusers and abuse survivors (social workers, womens Aid workers) saw the links that the story line made between physical and sexual violence as both important and realistic. Strongly held beliefs about abusers as being simply 'evil' or 'mad' were reinforced for 'general population' groups by Trevors' unpredictable and volatile characterisation, although these dimensions of his character added story line tension and narrative pace.

The *Brookside* story line arguably increased knowledge and understandings about the language, reality and effects of abuse. However 'general population' audiences largely rejected the idea of identifying or empathising with Mandy. This appeared to be the case on the grounds that 'a mother would always know' if her child was in danger, that they themselves would take swift action against an abuser and that abusers are identifiable. The apparent failure of the story line to communicate more complex and problematic aspects of the mothers' position or to raise debates around 'why men abuse' reflects the dearth of debates in wider media (including television news and documentaries) about these elements of the problem (Kitzinger and Skidmore 1995a). However the *Brookside* text may be an important factor. 'Trevor' was introduced as an external and short term character, he had no prior soap history. If the abuse had

been perpetrated by a regular, established figure in the soap opera, research participants may perhaps have engaged more fully with debates around abuser motivations and how abuse may be prevented. As it was, 'Trevor' was more easily sidelined as mentally disturbed. Indeed by constructing the character as a 'monster' research participants were spared the potentially more threatening figure of the abuser as 'the ordinary man'.

Participants with no special knowledge of the issue accepted, 'in theory' that abusers 'can be anyone' yet in practice rejected the idea of a more 'realistic' fictional portrayal of an abuser. The source of this belief rested on fears about personal safety, in other words, who could you trust? Those without special knowledge of the issue also accepted, 'in theory' that 'any child' can be at risk from abuse yet in practice, resisted the idea that children whom they knew may be 'at risk'. Participants without experience of sexual abuse believed that a 'normal' childhood could be damaged by knowledge about sex abuse and that soap operas might contribute to children making false allegations, a view which was challenged by members of 'special knowledge' groups as simply incorrect.

Participants without experience of sexual abuse believed that a mother would always 'know' that her children were being abused and could protect against abuse. This significantly reduced sympathy and credibility for the character of 'Mandy Jordache'. Participants with experience of child sexual abuse praised her portrayal as realistic. Those without experience of sexual abuse believed that soap operas should not portray negative realities about child sexual abuse, for example, a child disclosing and not being believed. Most participants who worked in this area however believed that realism rather than idealism should be portrayed, raising serious questions around how programme makers should approach this area.

The research discussed here, supports other work which has been carried out into women and media representations of violence (Schlesinger et al. 1992). Those who have experienced physical and sexual violence want the 'reality' of this 'lived experience' to be represented by media. The findings also reflect similar conclusions that "depicting or discussing violence on television, provided

it is done well and sensitively, may have a positive effect upon the lives of individual viewers and social life in general" (Schlesinger et al. 1992: 168).

A broad consensus existed among the audience groups that fiction should portray child sexual abuse but the study revealed deeper anxieties about wider issues of prevention and education. Many participants praised *Brookside* yet rejected the idea of their children for example, watching the abuse story line. Soap representations of the issue were perceived as contributing to a more positive social climate for 'survivors' but not for 'innocent' children. Fears that these portrayals might potentially 'corrupt' the innocence of a 'normal' child or trigger 'naive' children to make false or malicious allegations were pervasive across 'general population' groups but significantly absent in 'special knowledge' groups. Such concerns connect with deeply felt fears about the existence and nature of sexual abuse and also arguably reflect public anxiety which surrounds the inclusion of 'new' and unfamiliar topics in the television soap opera. In this respect, audiences responses may change as the topic moves increasingly into the domain of popular culture.

The study also demonstrates that the soap opera production team 'know' their audience. There were clearly identifiable links between the decisions which were made by members of the *Brookside* team around characterisation and story development and how audiences responded (for example, the visual techniques used to frame Trevor were clearly successful in building suspense and narrative tension). The young survivors of abuse were portrayed with sensitivity and challenged the stereotypical images of the abused as helpless victims. Although the consequences of Rachels' abuse were not dealt with immediately, due to human error, this delay in fact appeared to communicate important messages about the 'denial' of the abused child. However, despite the efforts of the production team to present Mandy as a sympathetic character (for example ensuring that Trevor was presented as having raped Beth only once) the 'general population' groups lacked empathy and identification for Mandy and saw her as colluding in her daughters' abuse.

The study demonstrates that examining the production context of the soap opera story line in addition to how audiences respond, may generate valuable

insights. It has been possible to explore how the production team conceive of their audience and the extent to which 'real' audiences interpret story lines in the ways in which production teams intend.

Chapter Eight: discussion and conclusion

INTRODUCTION

The Christmas Day episode of the BBC soap opera *EastEnders* is traditionally watched by a large family audience. At the close of 2001, *EastEnders* viewers saw the culmination of a long running domestic violence story line in which the character, known as 'Little Mo', was viciously beaten by her husband, 'Trevor' (BBC, 25.12.01). Trevor incidentally is the only Scottish character in *EastEnders*. The story line attracted a number of complaints from the public and in response to the overall increase in complaints specifically around soap story lines, the Broadcasting Standards Commission undertook their first study of sex and violence in the soaps for twenty years. This research was published in a report entitled "Soap Box or Soft Soap?" (Millwood Hargrave and Gatfield 2002) and it identifies a number of public concerns about the increase in controversial material in soap story lines (focusing on *EastEnders* and *Coronation Street*). The most important element highlighted by the research participants was that social issue story lines should be "factually correct" (Millwood Hargrave and Gatfield 2002: 28). The report made the front page of some newspapers (Conlan 2002, Westcott 2002) and provoked a demonstration in Trafalgar Square, London by groups protesting about the impact of this material on children (11 May 2002). The BBC responded to the criticism and said that story lines are "carefully considered and well researched", Granada television, similarly justified *Coronation Street* story lines and said "We are a realistic drama and we handle real - life issues with sensitivity" (Westcott 2002).

It would appear that the television soap opera continues to move into new territory and that periodically the same model of debates, criticism and justification will be played out in the media.

This thesis has been concerned with the rise in this type of material, in different soap operas during the 1990's. However it seems that these are debates which are still relevant as we begin the next decade. Throughout the thesis we have seen the complexity of the soap opera production process. I also hope to have

demonstrated through the different case studies that making a story line "factually correct" is not a simple process, not least because elements which may be taken to be factually correct by one group may in fact be contested by others. In addition, the repeated justification, on the part of the soaps, that story lines are 'well researched' is not unproblematic. Finally, I hope to have demonstrated that public concerns around story lines are more complex and involve more shades of grey than a MORI poll can explore.

This chapter discusses the implications of the results from the research study as a whole and reflects upon how this work relates to findings from existing literature. The research presented in this thesis also arguably relates to a number of concerns currently facing academic study in the field of media and cultural studies. The chapter reflects upon how the thesis might connect with these current debates. The ways in which media representations of breast cancer, sexual violence and mental distress are constructed, and the potential for soap story lines to influence public understandings is of interest beyond the academic community. The chapter therefore addresses how the results of the study may inform the interests of policy makers and pressure groups as well as television programme-makers. In conclusion I identify some areas in which future research around the television soap opera might be developed.

TELEVISION SOAP OPERA PRODUCTION

The study has been mainly concerned with articulating the production factors which influence how different substantive topics are selected and subsequently developed within different television soaps. As we have seen, these story lines are often not selected on an arbitrary basis. Nor do 'issues' simply present themselves. Despite how story line development is framed by some soap production workers, as simply highlighting the 'natural' concerns of the characters, television soap production is a process and story lines do not simply 'mirror' natural concerns. Certain story lines may be connected with particular existing characters (because of their 'look', their soap history or their demographic appeal). However in some soaps new characters can be introduced to the programme to take on a particular story line. This not only

allows the production team the freedom of 'trying out' a character but also enables the character (and indeed the issue) to be dispensed with if the story is not well received by audiences (or indeed by senior management).

An additional concern has been to map the wider socio-economic context within which story lines are produced and has implicitly addressed the relationship between the values presented in soap story lines, those involved in making the story and wider socio-cultural values. By delineating or unpacking, the underlying assumptions about what constitutes a 'good soap story' and 'what audiences want' it is possible to examine the priorities and values of the soap production team and their assumed audience. This exploration of a 'good' or 'strong' story line has therefore been both an aim and a finding of the production study.

There is undoubtedly soap diversity but there are some concerns which are shared by all soap operas regardless of their institutional context or their production ethos. The production case studies have highlighted that there are common themes which cut across all soap operas (for example, the production priorities of 'narrative pace' and the cliff - hanger). The sharing of narrative codes and formal structures has been identified in other literature which has examined the soap form (Buckingham 1987). The often implicit role played by the 'imagined' audience decision making about overall programme direction has also been observed in other prime time dramas (Espinosa 1982). However this study has developed previous research into television soap by addressing the perspectives of those who play a role in story development beyond the programme Producer or Channel Senior Management. The production process of television soap has been shown to be a site of struggle. The script - writers, story editors and consultants who work in television soap, may be seen to provide different accounts of the story background. The team process operates as a microcosm of society, with different workers bringing unique experiences and social knowledge to their professional role. Examining the role of less senior production workers has provided valuable insights into the 'team process' and the case studies reveal a significant level of commitment to story line development not only from the Producers' but also the script - writers.

These production workers also bring their existing prejudices, misconceptions and cultural identities to their professional work and examining their input to decisions made over developing stories is an important element of studying the soap production process.

The soap genre has been shown not to be, as is sometimes assumed, a single entity and there is soap diversity even in the British context. Although the literature around the production of soap opera is not so well developed as in other areas of media (principally, news media) there have been some studies of the institutional context of producing television soap (Buckingham 1987).

However I have demonstrated the value of addressing the production context of more than one soap opera and illustrated how the production philosophies and ethos of production teams bring this vision to their work. This has allowed me to map intra-genre diversity, from the sunny 'sanitised' world of Australian soap, *Neighbours* to the 'gritty realism' of British soap, *Brookside*. Different soaps have different self-images and agendas. Some actively pursue an 'agenda setting' ethos (such as *Brookside* and others favour 'entertainment' (such as *Coronation Street*) however this can change (see *Emmerdale*). Other soap operas may appear to the viewer or media researcher, to be 'obviously' engaged in social education but the self image of production team members is concerned with simply raising issues which have emerged 'naturally' from the characters. This perception could be said to echo the 'mirror' model adopted by news journalists who view themselves as autonomous individuals, simply reflecting back the news events of the world.

It has been possible to demonstrate how these key differences in reputation, philosophy and ethos clearly interconnect and influence the production priorities of different soaps and how these in turn relate to the nature of representation. For example, *Brookside* tackled sexual violence within the family and attempted to portray the moment of abuse (a risky departure for a pre-watershed soap) whereas *Emmerdale* tackled the same topic but did so retrospectively and portrayed neither the abuse nor the abuser. We have seen that audiences have not dilemmas in distinguishing between fact and fiction but people do distinguish between different soap operas and bring different viewing

expectations to their soap watching. This had implications for audience views on whether or not television soap per se was an appropriate format within which to address sexual abuse and also made an impact on the reception of a specific story line. The production study revealed that not every soap can deal with every issue (even within the same broad theme) in the same way and the audience study confirmed that certain soaps have been successful in building a reputation for socially realistic drama.

The production study also developed previous inquiries into soap opera by exploring the production context of diverse substantive story line topics. This allowed wider questions to be addressed about whether some issues are socially approved and others are not. Breast cancer, mental distress and child sexual abuse have been shown to be positioned very differently and this had clear consequences for the nature of representation. Breast cancer and child sexual abuse were perceived by production teams as topics deserving of serious commitment whereas mental distress was more openly used as a plot device to drive the narrative pace and grip audiences. This reflects how specific issues are positioned differently within British culture and also arguably reflects inequities of access to media and the differences in credibility awarded to source organisations working in the different fields. The extent to which outside agencies were involved in the production process differed substantially (the support of breast cancer organisations was explicitly sought and research on the perpetrators and survivors of sexual abuse was conducted; by contrast, no research was undertaken into mental distress). This also had consequences for the specific development of story lines (the editing of sexual violence scenes and the care taken over portrayals of the breast cancer survivor).

The wider cultural climate might operate to limit or censor images and language (noting the complaints and interventions made to and from outside bodies was an important element of the study). Clearly, the medical or sexual content of story lines was seen to provoke significant dilemmas for production personnel whereas mental distress was a subject considered in the case study to be important only in terms of a 'good story'. Broader substantive themes may be governed by wider cultural concerns and reveal socio cultural anxieties, for

example the necessity that Trevor had abused Beth only once, potentially taps into concerns which are beyond the programme itself.

As noted earlier, this research develops previous work on the institutional context within which soap operas are produced by also addressing the perspectives of and roles played by different members of the production team, such as Story Editors, consultants and script-writers, thus developing existing research (Buckingham 1987). This is important because it has been possible to examine how the soap production process is characterised by struggles and tensions over story development. Indeed production team members are sometimes explicitly provoked to bring their personal views to the story conference. The interviews with those further down the hierarchy added invaluable perspectives to the study. For example, this was particularly useful in the context of relating commercial tensions to 'issue story lines'. Producers are, after all the 'official' voices of the programme. The soap opera producer has been seen to be more closely involved with the internal corporate negotiations than other Producers (Tunstall 1993). We saw how the producer of *Emmerdale*, for example, was instructed to insert social issue story lines to the programme in order to capture the audiences which advertisers seek to attract (making the programme more attractive to younger viewers). The British context of soap opera is very different to the American context where advertisers have more direct input into the programme (Geraghty 1991: 4). Despite this we have seen that Producers are concerned with the positioning of their programme and that sometimes implicit concerns of advertisers (for example the programmes' demographics) will be reflected in the story selection and casting. Television soap opera it would seem is one of the most important formats for a broadcasting organisation. The soap occupies an important position, represents the key ratings strategy and contributes to the overall image of the channel. The format is also closely monitored in terms of language and imagery (by internal senior management and external organisations). The soap story line is subject to self-censorship which operates at the level of Producer, who as we have seen, is keen not to jeopardise the relationship with senior management. The writers are far less concerned with these priorities. Producing soap is a team process, the soap story line is a product of many different men and women at

different points within the organisation. Soap opera production team members do bring all of their experiences to bear upon constructing a story for audiences. Much as there has been identified a 'news sense' I would argue that soap production personnel bring an instinctive 'soap sense' to their work. It is something which is not necessarily ever explicitly defined, or spoken of, but it guides the production decisions in particular directions. Members of the team understand what works for audiences in what ways. They may not, as has been observed with journalists, write simply for themselves or other journalists.

There is also no simple correlation between 'research' and representation. In particular the writers subscribe to a professionalism culture in which they perceive themselves as artists, a point also noted about writers on American prime time series *Dynasty* (Gripsrud 1995). There is no single view within each production about story development. However, in each of my case studies, explicit inter production conflicts were always resolved in favour of those with power, in other words, senior management.

Although breast cancer and child sexual abuse were perceived as requiring 'special' responsibilities, as with any other story line, the judicious use of narrative pace and aesthetic codes were nonetheless used to engage audiences. We have seen in detail how the traditional soap devices such as the 'cliff - hanger' was used to different extents and with different purposes and how decisions made over casting and characterisation were premised on previous knowledge of what might 'work' for audiences.

Soap opera production is also of course constrained by technical or practical elements such as the availability of actors, sets and equipment. The production process is also necessarily one in which time is important. There are fixed bureaucratic routines, regular conferences are held in which the overall direction of the show is discussed, issues of continuity are resolved and actors receive their scripts and rehearse to a specifically pre ordained regime, otherwise episodes could not be transmitted with the frequency required (see also Dyer 1981). Analysing these functions of an organisation only tell part of the story and reveal little about how meanings and messages are made.

A central theme running through the production interviews with different soap personnel were the distinctions made between the genres of soap and television documentary. However documentary makers operate within some of the same constraints as soap opera production teams. The requirements of narrative pace, cliff-hangers and engaging the audience are not elements which are confined to the soap genre but are important factors for other television programme-makers. There is also no simple correlation between including 'real' as opposed to 'fictional' characters in a media account of mental distress and framing the issue in more challenging ways. Issues of privacy, ethics and stigma may work against including certain groups of mental health service users. Central issues such as filming psychiatric patients in hospital because of ease of access immediately exclude groups of users who would possibly present very different accounts of their experiences. The level of control exerted by the medical hierarchy was also noted as an important factor in securing access to patients. The problem of 'self selecting' patients, people who were seen as 'professionally mentally ill' with little to lose by identifying themselves on screen was perceived by documentary makers as the patients themselves contributing to media accounts (skewed towards the violent or unpredictable). In this area the role played by broadcasting hierarchy may be very important. Documentary makers have spoken of the hierarchical pressure to produce dramatic accounts of mental distress. In some respects soap opera Producers may have more autonomy over the eventual product than documentary makers, even those who produce documentary series independently.

However in other respects it was possible to identify the factors which might facilitate more challenging portrayals. Here there are four key factors at the level of production, which may influence the nature of representation in formats other than the soap. First, the relative easing of deadline pressure (allowing for carrying out more detailed background research). Second, the ethos of a programme. Third, production personnell's personal experience of and commitment to the area (for example of the issue under discussion) and fourth, the support of senior broadcasting management.

STUDYING SOAPS

The research discussed here builds on other studies of the television soap opera which have traditionally focused on how the formal structures of the television soap opera affords female audiences significant pleasures (Ang 1985). The repetition, seriality and unresolved narrative structure of soap has been cited as reflecting the 'essential' nature of femininity (Modleski 1982), the 'culturally constructed skills of femininity' (Brunsdon 1981) and the organisation of 'women's time' (Hobson 1982). In this respect most of the work around soaps has been concerned with exploring the formal structures of the genre in relation to questions of women's subordination and wider structures of patriarchy (Lovell 1981).

The studies mentioned above have characterised the soap genre as inherently 'progressive' in the focus on women and the domestic sphere. British soap operas are seeking new audiences beyond the traditional 'female' viewer. The contemporary British soap opera is not just a feminine form designed to capture female audiences. However the soap structure may be particularly appropriate for certain issues and can portray different models of those affected. In this respect the role of the older woman, the matriarch, traditionally at the heart of the soap structure meant that *EastEnders* was able to provide a valuable counterpoint to the images of the young female cancer survivors which dominate media reporting of the topic.

The repetitive nature of soap with a core of established characters may also allow a level of identification and empathy which is impossible to replicate in other fictional forms (for example, the single drama series). This familiarity and repetition of course also allows viewers to bring a historical context to the airing of a social problem, which would simply not be possible in news and documentary programming. The structure of the soap serial facilitates the 'coming to terms' with an issue over time and can include important emotional dimensions of ambivalence, confusion and denial. This may be a particularly significant element for certain dimensions of a social issue (the anger of the breast cancer survivor or the confusion of the abused child). Certainly, the soap

format may be progressive in its sheer ability to depict 'the abused and abuser' or the 'patient' at point of medical diagnosis. These are important portrayals which would be governed by legal and ethical considerations in any other format and which have been traditionally absent from wider media accounts of these issues. The serial nature of the programme also enables the revisiting of issues over time, for example we have seen how it has been possible to return to a breast cancer story line years after the character is originally diagnosed.

Soap portrayals of serious issues may also under certain circumstances provide radical resolutions to social problems. The portrayal of an abused wife killing her abuser to protect her daughters was certainly radical and provided a rare representation of a powerless woman taking control (the act also fulfilled revenge fantasies for young survivors of sexual abuse). In this respect this work challenges other studies of soap substantially. For example Dorothy Hobson (1982) argued in her study of *Crossroads* that soaps simply raise problems, the solutions are not important because resolutions do not 'move outside the consensus'. Hobson has stated that "Although the solutions to problems may not be seen as progressive, it is often in the raising of those problems in fictional forms that is important" (Hobson 1982:131).

The research discussed here has demonstrated substantively that this contention is simply not correct in relation to the programmes analysed in this research. Certainly we have seen how some issues may provoke particular dilemmas for soap production teams who must work quickly to draw in their audience. The case studies reveal how potential risk may be managed, incorporated and neutralised. Tania Modleski's observation in the early 1980s that issues which may explode the family structure are 'simply ignored' in television soaps, such as homosexuality is in marked contrast to the introduction, in the 1990s, of sexual violence within the family in British soaps (Modleski 1982).

Here we can see the value of addressing the nature of representation alongside the priorities of production teams, and the skills and knowledge that they draw upon to utilise all of the aesthetic codes and conventions of the soap to make such subjects engaging for audiences. The decisions over such elements as

casting the role and driving the story through judicious narrative pace can, in the case of breast cancer, make a story of medical tragedy and uncertainty, appealing for audiences. Such decisions may equally however operate to heighten the threat of these issues to the soap community and consequently heighten tensions for audiences. In the case of the abusive fictional character there was no attempt to integrate them within the soap structure, they were always intended to be 'written off' (Fuqua 1995). However by constructing a character such as Trevor Jordache via traditional characterisations of the soap 'villain', a deeply threatening story of incest and sexual violence may be transformed almost into pantomime. The potential 'threat' of abuse to the ideology of the family is diffused by these aesthetic codes. In this sense, the thesis significantly develops other work on social issues in television soap opera (Geraghty 1991). Geraghty has been concerned with how in the 1980's, the 'new British soaps', particularly *EastEnders* and *Brookside* shifted focus from the domestic to the public sphere and the success with which wider questions of class, race and gender were incorporated into the programmes. Her interest has been more to "map out the general contours of the soap terrain" on the grounds that "Writing about soap opera is a perilous business. There is no fixed object of study over which the critic can pore, hoping to extract a further nuance" (Geraghty 1991: 7). Here Geraghty is making points about what she sees as the 'non fixed' nature of the soap serial (the ways in which story lines continuously shift, characters change and actors leave the programmes). Geraghty has therefore been concerned with the rise in socially realistic material in the soaps of the 1980's and has been able only to speculate on the motivations or consequences of the shift from the domestic to the public. This thesis has developed this work substantially and by exploring the changing landscape of the British soaps in the 1990's, has demonstrated that it is possible to examine the meanings of a story line, at a certain time and in context.

The introduction of sexual violence story lines to the television soap opera also challenges Geraghty's observation that "the family becomes less of a battleground and more of a place of safety where there is some protection from the harshness of the world outside" (Geraghty 1991: 83). The inclusion of 'the

abuser' within the family quite clearly presents problems to the structure of the soap and in particular challenges the assumption that 'threat' lies outside the community.

In conclusion then, despite what has traditionally been observed about the soap opera narrative and its engagement with audiences, not all members of the audience need identify with the fictional 'problem'. Instead it would seem that production teams must generate 'affective' engagement. This may be hate (for example towards 'psychos' Carmel and Trevor, characters which threatened family life) or empathy (towards Patricia and Peggy with their breast cancer, who through their soap history engendered audience identification). In short, what matters is that audiences 'care'. It is this element which will deliver and sustain audiences for the production.

The soap genre therefore has the potential for more radical or challenging representations. However as we have seen throughout the different case studies, these possibilities are constrained by a number of factors both internal and external (organisational ethos, regulatory and censorship issues, underpinned by commercial imperatives). The relative 'openness' of television fiction has been observed by Philip Schlesinger et al. (1983). Their study analysed both factual and fictional portrayals of 'terrorism' and found that "television fiction enjoys significant advantages over journalism which make it, potentially at least, more flexible in the way it can deal with issues" (Schlesinger et al. 1983: 77). The fictional television format was for example, able to bring groups of people together who, at that time, would not have appeared 'on screen' in news or documentary programmes (e.g. terrorists and members of security forces). The fictional format also was shown to enable the discussion of philosophy and motivations of groups which may be absent from other media. However this is a potential and not a 'given'. Schlesinger et al. qualify their statements by also noting that fiction is subject to constraints, "the commercial pressures of the rating battle and by the constraints and possibilities of the genres and narrative styles they adopt" (Schlesinger et al. 1983: 77). The thesis therefore develops this work by addressing the precise nature of these

constraints and possibilities as they apply to the context of television soap opera.

Soap operas have been traditionally defined against other genres by their lack of narrative closure and this has arguably had consequences for how the soap form has been studied. As other work has noted:

The absence of a final moment of narrative closure also indefinitely postpones any moment of final ideological or moral closure in the open serial. This probably makes the open serial a poor vehicle for the inculcation of particular values, but it does mean that open serial writers and producers can raise any number of potentially controversial and contentious social issues without having to make any ideological commitment to them. The viewer is not looking for a moral to the story in the same way he or she is in a closed narrative, even a closed serial. This is not to say that open serials are not ideological constructs, but it is ultimately not in their interest (or that of their producers or sponsors) to be seen to take sides on any particularly issue or to appear to be overtly didactic (Allen 1995: 21).

The serial nature of the soap opera may raise problems for academic researchers who wish to apply models of inquiry which have been used on factual media texts. A point noted by David Morley (1981) and developed in the following quotation from Seiter et. al. (1989).

The concept of 'preferred reading', which has been developed in the context of news and current affairs television, raises a number of problems when applied to fictional forms. The hierarchy of discourses in television's fictional texts tends to be more ambiguous, preventing narrative closure on all levels of the text, and thus rendering the text more open to divergent meanings (Seiter et al. 1989).

I would argue that this problem should not necessarily disqualify fictional texts from rigorous study. But rather points to the value of examining a fictional text in its proper context. It is possible I think to establish 'preferred' readings through close examination of language and imagery. Which characters are presenting different viewpoints, how these characters are positioned in relation to the soap community and how aesthetic codes are drawn upon to frame their viewpoint. If this is also pursued in combination with proper analysis of the intent of producers and further clarified through audience reception work it is possible to build a more complete picture of the nature of story line messages.

Soap operas and audiences

The thesis was also concerned with the potential impact which television soap opera story lines may have on different audiences. The case study of *Brookside's* sexual violence story demonstrated that audiences bring their personal experiences of an issue to their viewing experience. In keeping with other research, the study demonstrates that it is important not just to explore social class dimensions of reading but also social experiences and knowledge about the world (Philo 1990). The dominant literature on audiences and soaps has traditionally highlighted the power of audiences (Ang 1985). Indeed different theorists have proposed that the soap genre may elicit as many meanings as there are viewers. However while audiences do actively engage with soaps and do of course often gain pleasure from their viewing experience, the readings of soap opera story lines are patterned. This point is in contrast with what has been proposed by Hobson (1982). The audience case study presented in this thesis therefore challenges other work which has claimed that texts have infinite meanings (Fiske 1987). While we have seen that different people within the groups may respond differently to story line messages this is not the same as saying that they produced different meanings. These are different responses to the same meaning. For example no member of the groups 'read' Trevor as not being abusive. Some research participants who had no prior knowledge of issues in sexual abuse or domestic violence thought that Trevors' behaviour was exaggerated. Other research participants drew upon their existing knowledge of 'real' families and 'real' abusers and saw Trevors' characterisation

as realistically representative of a man who was motivated by the desire for control. In other words the research participants responded differently to the character, they did not produce different meanings.

The audience responses were also remarkably uniform and followed clear patterns of knowledge, experience, and the use of logic to consider possible effects or consequences. These points noted above challenge Hobsons' contention which has been noted earlier, that "there are as many different Crossroads as there are viewers. Tonight twelve million, tomorrow thirteen million; with thirteen million possible understandings of the programme (Hobson 1982: 136). The audience is simply not making up millions of different meanings every time the programme is transmitted. Indeed the *Brookside* audience study demonstrated the importance of audiences' knowledge or experience of the substantive topic under discussion. The audience strand of the research also develops other work which has explored what audiences bring to their viewing experiences (Schlesinger et al. 1992). However as we have seen, it is also possible to begin to tap into questions of 'what audiences take away' from their viewing experience (in terms of media influence and exploring meanings and memories). Put simply, the audience strand of the thesis has demonstrated that soap operas have influence on audiences and *Brookside* was effective in communicating messages about child sexual abuse to people who had no previous experience to draw upon. The potential for television soap opera to influence audience understandings is subject to constraints however. Audiences do not receive information in a cultural or social vacuum. Media messages are mediated by other important factors, by what they already know, by other culturally powerful messages (for example the ideology of 'motherhood'). The method of reproducing soap scripts allowed the examination of how *Brookside* viewers could reproduce language and vocabulary from the fictional story and were able to understand complex dimensions of the issue, such as the confusion experienced by a child survivor. Only those with experience of sexual abuse (from working in the field for example) had this depth of understanding.

Under certain circumstances then we might conclude that soap operas are clearly an important conduit of information about social issues. Yet analyses of

the actual messages contained in soap operas, the motivations behind the timing and development of story lines and the uses of this information by different audiences have been the focus of surprisingly few recent studies in the field of media and cultural studies. In focusing upon the domestic uses of technology, demonstrating that there are often gendered frictions over the use of the remote control (Morley and Silverstone 1990) or reasserting the feminine pleasures of the genre, the opportunity to study the cultural power of soap opera messages is lost. Questions of media impact have now been sidelined in favour of studies of consumption and identity. As John Corner emphasises:

the question of an ideological level of media power as a political issue at all has slipped almost entirely off the main research agenda, if not from framing commentary... so much conceptual effort has been centred on audiences' interpretative activity that even the preliminary theorization of influence has become awkward (Corner 1991: 267).

The audience research study discussed in this thesis therefore also raises important questions about media power and the 'active' audience. The wave of 'active audience' research in which texts are seen to have no fixed meanings has come to dominate research studies of media audiences. David Miller (1994) has observed that "In the end the supposedly 'radical' approaches of the new audience theorists is largely indistinguishable from the study of the consumption of any other item of modern household technology. There is very little sense in any of this work of the consequences not of television as a technology but precisely as a message-bearing technology. For this school of theorists there seems to be no analytical difference between a television and a toaster" (Miller 1994: 270). Philo and Miller (2001) have provided a significant challenge to this direction and identified the ways in which the 'encoding/decoding model' proposed by Stuart Hall (1973) has been used to energise a wave of research in media and cultural studies. This body of literature has moved further from the meanings of texts and their relationship to 'reality' in favour of focusing only on audiences 'interpretative resistance'. In Philo and Millers' view this has been to fundamentally misconceive Halls' point that "it is the meanings of texts which

are 'negotiated' rather than meanings about reality" (Philo and Miller 2001: 52). The consequences of the concept of 'the active audience' and its focus on the power of 'interpretative resistance' have been significant not least because of the ways in which such research has been structured. Philo and Miller have written of how such studies were unable to investigate or find 'effects'. As they state:

This was because they tended only to examine the interpretation (or reading) of texts rather than whether anyone believed them. The move from examining the role of texts in the interpretation of reality to examining the interpretations of texts only thus lost a crucial link with the material world. Research in this tradition was unable to properly conceptualize questions of influence on popular beliefs about the world. Such research did not examine the influence of media on belief or the actual use by audiences of their own real experience in criticising texts (as opposed to their presumed ability to make up another meaning!" (Philo and Miller 2001: 52).

I would agree with these points. The audience research study which has been discussed here has demonstrated that people are able to reject media messages on different grounds however the study did not find that the research participants constructed their own infinite meanings.

Reflections on methodology

The study was also developed to explore how the intentions of the production team, the nature of representation and audience reception might inter relate (in one area of sexual violence). The case studies in which these questions have been addressed provide a unique insight into the relationship between these different elements of the 'circuit of communication'. It has been possible to examine the story line as it has developed from the intentions of the production team members, through to how the story developed 'on screen' and then to examine the impact upon different audiences. In so doing it has been possible

to map the different priorities and constraints which shape the nature and influence of soap representations.

The method of addressing story line content along with a related production and audience study is not usually applied to television fiction and has never to my knowledge been used to examine diversity across different soap opera productions. However there are valuable insights which could have been gained by adopting a different methodology. For example it would have been instructive to have been present at story line meetings where these issues were discussed and to witness the decision making process in situ. A more ethnographic approach would have allowed a depth of insight into the production process which is not possible by conducting interviews. However an ethnographic approach would have inevitably limited my study to perhaps a single story line in one soap opera. It would also have been difficult to gain this level of access to all of the soaps I have included here partly due to the organisational tensions which accompany change in programme direction. Other academic researchers who have conducted participant observation 'on set' have been positioned by production team members as representing their 'conscience' (Intintoli 1984). It would arguably be very difficult to disentangle the potential influence of the researcher 'on set' on their responses.

IMPLICATIONS FOR INTEREST GROUPS, POLICY

MAKERS AND PROGRAMME - MAKERS

The substantive topics that comprise the core case studies, child sexual abuse, mental distress and breast cancer are areas in which different groups have lobbied for change in media representation. By 'unpacking' the soap opera production process it has been possible to articulate the diversity of the soap genre and the priorities of different teams. This diversity is an important consideration for those seeking to influence change in representation. It is important to move beyond simple questions of 'blaming the media' for inaccurate or insensitive portrayals. Important opportunities may be found in collaborating with particular soap operas which have a programme identity which will allow a mutually beneficial collaboration. More challenging

representations might also be developed with the personal commitment from producers and writers.

It has been noted elsewhere that soap operas are now viewed as potential carriers of social policy messages and that this is not unproblematic (Franklin 1999). Here I simply wish to reinforce the point that soap operas do under certain circumstances take on issues at the behest of source organisations (see *Brooksides'* breast cancer story). However there is a distinct power imbalance. Story line development does not rest with outside agencies but within the production team and organisational hierarchy. To assume that a soap opera story line will necessarily increase public understandings in a positive way is to invest the soap opera with a role and responsibility that may be unfeasible. It is also important to note that audiences may not respond in ways which the programme-makers anticipate or that policy makers or source organisations would wish (see for example how 'general population' groups rejected identifying with the plight of the 'battered wife'). Put simply, collaborations with soaps must be carefully judged and not assumed to produce a direct line to necessarily 'better' representations..

The content of soap opera story lines is likely to remain under scrutiny by broadcast regulators, not least because soap operas are so frequently the subject of cultural debate (particularly newspaper coverage but also wider media). The debates raised in other sections of the media however do not present the complexity of public concerns. Nor I would argue is it possible to examine the impact of soap story lines on 'the public' by conducting opinion polls. My study of a soap opera story line on audiences' understandings revealed that personal experience is a central factor in audiences' reception of potentially controversial material in a soap. Soaps are also positioned differently and some may have a programme identity which is well established as 'issue led'. The novelty of a story line issue has also been shown to generate anxiety, particularly concerning the impact on children however this anxiety may be diffused over time as the cultural tolerance of an issue changes and becomes more integrated into the domain of popular culture.

This has implications for those involved in making television soap opera. Social issue story lines are potentially very powerful. The television soap has played an important role in increasing public awareness of different health issues and social problems. The ways in which an issue is framed and developed in television soap may fuel or challenge existing misconceptions about an issue and dealing with material of this nature and the implications for those affected by the issue brings a significant responsibility.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

The medium of television soap opera is subject to intense pressures. The role of the soap opera as a flagship production for a channel means that the format, perhaps even more so than other television formats, will reflect the wider changing broadcasting climate. It seems likely that the genre will continue to adopt new and different issues for treatment, becoming less character led and more plot driven. It seems crucial that the production process and the conflicts and tensions which underline this process are analysed. Producers and writers are not autonomous and organisational and commercial priorities can and do, override concerns of 'social realism'. The tightly fixed ideas of what constitutes a 'good story' and perceptions of 'what audiences want' can exclude complex but socially important elements. Commercial pressures are unlikely to desist as the broadcasting industry attempts to hold on to their audience share and advertising revenue despite increased competition from cable, satellite and digital television. Soaps are certainly not now simply for and about women and female audiences are being sought for other niche television markets. The central role played by the television soap opera in delivering audiences (particularly the 'youth' audience sought by advertisers) may become even more pressurised as competition increases. The traditional soap opera has always endured competition with rival soaps from other channels, however the broadcasting landscape in the early 2000's is quite different from previous decades. The soap opera now faces an additional level of competition from the docu-soaps with their ability to blend the popular elements of soap with real life voyeurism and other forms of drama (police and medical series) which once had a clear genre distinct from soaps are changing. The soap opera may thus

be particularly vulnerable to pressures from the wider economic climate and the impact of this on the format and the consequences for audiences remains to be seen.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The research findings discussed above suggest several avenues for future research. The study has been characterised by an engagement with social issues which are of consequence out with the fictional world of soap opera. Future research around the soap format might also usefully re engage with the substantive nature of story line content. It would also be instructive to examine the production processes in different soaps at different times (across different cultures) and to explore the internal and external influences on story line content and inter and intra genre diversity.

There are implications for this research beyond the academic study of the television soap opera. The links between television soap opera and public understandings have been shown to provide important insights into how a site of entertainment may convey different messages and be used by audiences in different ways from news media. The 'public knowledge' project which has been concerned with the power of the media in framing messages about public issues may be usefully engaged with the fictional as well as the factual media format

Television soap opera is able to communicate with very large numbers of people and present images and messages which relate to important social problems. It is also a site of struggle for different groups in society. Future studies might therefore reveal useful insights about the state of the broadcasting industry in general, the commercial imperatives and the role that economic pressures play in influencing soap opera output. However it would also be possible to explore social and cultural change in wider society by examining which groups or perspectives are being promoted or are neglected in the soap genre at different points in time. In addition, addressing the ways in which the wider media frames these issues and how 'the public' and those involved with monitoring programme content respond may reveal important

insights into the direction of society. At the very least, it is to be hoped that the thesis has demonstrated that the television soap opera is worthy of serious study for those with an interest in media power.

Appendix 1: Tables 1- 5 Interviewees.

ID code	Position	Programme	Main Interview Topics	Length	Nature of Interview
01csaf	Script-Writer	Brookside	Sexual violence	90 minutes	Telephone
02mif	Script-Writer	Coronation Street	Mental Illness	30 minutes	Telephone
03csaf	Story Editor	Emmerdale	Sexual abuse/ sensitive issues	90 minutes	Telephone
04mif	Producer	Coronation Street	Mental Illness/ CSA Sensitive issues	90 minutes	In Person
05csam	Producer	Casualty	Sensitive Issues	60 minutes	Telephone
06dvf	Producer	Coronation Street	Domestic Violence	30 minutes	Telephone
07mim	Head of BBC Drama	BBC drama	Mental Illness	45 minutes	In Person
08csaf	Script Editor	Casualty	Child sexual abuse	45 minutes	Telephone
09csaf	Script Writer	Casualty	Sensitive issues	45 minutes	Telephone
10csaf	Script Writer	Casualty	Sensitive issues	20 minutes	Telephone
11csam	Script Writer	Brookside	Sexual violence	40 minutes	In Person
12csaf	Producer	Emmerdale	Sensitive topics	90 minutes	Telephone

Table 1 Production Interviewees (soap opera, drama series, single series).

ID	Position	Programme	Subjects	Length	Nature of Interview
13csam	Story Consultant	EastEnders	Sexual violence	30 minutes	Telephone
14csaf	Script Writer	Children's Ward	Child sexual abuse	35 minutes	Telephone
15csam	Producer	Brookside	Sensitive issues	90 minutes	In Person
16csaf	Producer	Press Gang	Child sexual abuse	60 minutes	Telephone
17csam	Deviser and Writer	Press Gang	Child sexual abuse	90 minutes	In Person
18csam	Producer	Brookside	Sensitive issues	60 hour	Telephone
19casf	Story Office	Brookside	Sensitive issues	20 minutes	Telephone
20casf	Script-writer	Casualty	Mental distress	2 hours	In person
21casf	Script-editor	Casualty	Mental distress	2 hours	In person
22bcm	Story Editor	EastEnders	Breast Cancer	25 minutes	Telephone
23bcm	Script-writer	Brookside	Breast Cancer	40 minutes	Telephone
24bcm	Story Editor	EastEnders	Breast Cancer	45 minutes	Telephone
25csaf	Story Editor	Neighbours	Sensitive Issues Child Abduction	N/A	Written response
26csam	Script-writer	Brookside	Sensitive Issues	60 minutes	In person

Table 1 Production Interviewees (soap opera, drama series, single series).

ID	Position	Programme/ Organisation	Main interview topics	Length	Nature of interview
27casm	Medical Adviser	Casualty	Sensitive Issues	45 minutes	In person
28casf	Consultant psychiatrist	Casualty	Sensitive Issues	50 minutes	In person
29bcf	Head of Comms.	Breakthrough	Health/breast cancer	40 minutes	In Person
30bcf	Senior Press Officer	Cancer Research Campaign s	Cancer and media	60 minutes	In person
31bcf	Head of Clinical Programming	Cancer Research Campaign	Cancer and media	25 minutes	In person
32bcf	Senior Press Officer	Cancer Research Campaign s	Cancer and media	40 minutes	In Person
33bcf	Senior Press Officer	Imperial Cancer Research Fund	Breast Cancer	25 minutes	In Person
34mif	Press Officer	SAMH	Mental Distress	1 hour 30 minutes	In person
35mif	Press Officer	NSF	Mental Distress	45 minutes	Telephone
36bcm	Head of Comms.	BACUP	Breast Cancer	40 minutes	In Person
37bcf	Head of Comms	Breast Cancer Care	Breast Cancer	30 minutes	In Person
38bcf	Senior Press Officer	BACUP	Breast Cancer	60 minutes	Telephone

Table 2. Source organisation/consultants Interviewees

ID	Position	Organisation	Subjects	Length	Nature of Interview
39bcf	Co-ordinator	Breast Cancer Care	Breast Cancer	60 minutes	In Person
40bcf	Head of Comms	Breakthrough	Breast Cancer	55 minutes	In Person
41bcf	Senior press Officer	Wellcome Institute	Breast Cancer	45 minutes	In Person
42bcf	Head of Comms	Breast Cancer Care	Breast Cancer and soap opera	40 minutes	In Person
43bcf	Public Relations Manager	Macmillan cancer relief	Breast Cancer and soap opera / product placement	60 minutes	In person
44bcm	Press Officer	Wellcome	Science and media	40 minutes	In person
45bcf	Spokes Person	The Breast Cancer Campaign	Breast cancer and media	35 minutes	In Person

Table 2. Source organisation/consultants Interviewees

ID	Position	Organisation	Subjects	Length	Nature of Interview
46csaf	Spokes Person	Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse	Child sexual abuse	60 minutes	Telephone
47csaf	Support Worker	Womens Support Project	Child sexual abuse and sexual violence	60 minutes	Telephone
48csaf	Celebrity campaigner	Childwatch ChildLine	Sexual Abuse	20 minutes	Telephone
49racm	Campaign/ Activist	STOA campaign for ethnic minority in media	Race/ Popular culture	30 minutes	Telephone
50bcf	Campaigner	Hereditary Breast Cancer	Breast Cancer and media	40 minutes	Telephone
52bcm	Spokes Person	Genetic Interest Group	Genetics and media/soaps popular reps	30 minutes	Telephone
53bcf	Spokes person	MIND	Mental health and media	60 minutes	In person
54bcf	Spokes person	National Cancer alliance	Breast cancer genetics and PR strategies	45 minutes	Telephone

Table 3. Campaign/Interest Group Representatives

ID	Position	Organisation	Subjects	Length	Nature of Interview
55mif	Independent Producer	Doc. Series	Mental Illness	60 minutes	In Person
56mif	BBC Producer	Doc. Series	Mental Illness	60 minutes	In Person
57csam	Producer	Doc. Series	CSA	60 minutes	In Person
58bcf	Journalist	Trade newspaper	Breast Cancer/ PR industries And product placement	45 minutes	In person
59bcm	Executive Producer	Doc. Series	Sensitive issues in documentary	120 hours	In person
60bcf	Health Editor	Womens' magazine	Breast Cancer science coverage	35 minutes	Telephone
61csam	Film Writer/ Director	Film about sexual violence	Sexual violence	30 minutes	Telephone
62racm	Author/ Writer	Writer	Race/ Popular Culture	40 minutes	Telephone

Table 4. Additional interviews with media production personnel (including documentary, film)

ID	Position	Programme	Subjects	Length	Nature of Interview
63csaf	Co-ordinator	Broadcasting Support Services	Soaps and sensitive issues	25 minutes	Telephone
64bcf	Co-ordinator	Telephone help line	Soaps and sensitive issues (breast cancer)	35 minutes	In person

Table 5: Compilation of industry reports on audience impact of television soap story lines

Appendix 2. Description of the Focus Group Participants

Group Description: 'special interest'	ID Code	No. of participants	Age Range
Social Workers	SW	4 female	27 - 35 yr.
Representatives from five different Women's Organisations	WO	5 female	31 - 46 yr.
Teenage sexual abuse survivors	TS	5 female	13 - 14 yr.

Table 6. Focus Group Sessions with 'special interest' participants

Group Description: 'general population'	ID Code	No. of participants	Age Range
Youth Club Committee Members	YC	4 male, 4 female	16 – 26 yr.
State School Students	SSS	5 male, 5 female	17 yr.
Private School Students	PSS	4 male, 4 female	17 – 18 yr.
Flatmates (East End, Glasgow)	FME	2 male, 4 female	19 – 22 yr.
Flatmates (West End, Glasgow)	FMW	3 male, 3 female	20 – 21 yr.
University Students	US	3 female	21 – 26 yr.
Foreign Language Teachers	FLT	3 female, 3 male	25 – 34 yr.
Office workers (Secretary/Cleaners)	OW	5 female	27 – 45 yr.
Retired People	RP	3 female	53 – 66 yr.

Table 7. Focus Group Sessions with 'general population' participants

Appendix 3. Sample Interview Schedule for Production Personnel

Personal Background

Can you outline your personal biography (how and why you came to join the production, your previous work)?

Can you describe your role within the organisation and your relationship with other production personnel in terms of hierarchy and decision making?

Constraints of Topic

Can you explain how (a specific story line) was initially generated?

Was it raised in the same way as other less sensitive story topics or not?

Did you foresee or find any particularly difficulties with developing this story line (for audiences, with senior management, other key figures)?

Would you have tackled anything differently in retrospect?

Research and Advice

Did you take any advice from outside agencies? Did this include interviews with those affected, collaboration with source organisations or reading other media accounts?

Do you have a personal barometer of what is acceptable? Do you ever self censor? Do you feel a special responsibility when working on a story line about (particular topic) or not?

Did you think there should have been help lines run after the episode (or more help lines ran)?

What constraints do you think affect what you can do in the genre (e.g. topic, actors, cliff-hangers)? What are the limits and/or possibilities of the soap genre?

Do you have a mental image of your viewer which guides you in your work?

Appendix 4. Detailed Synopses of the Breast Cancer Stories

Breast cancer in Brookside

The story line first begins in 1994 when Patricia Farnham a successful businesswoman discovers that she has a lump in her breast. The lump proves to be malignant and she finally undergoes a mastectomy followed by chemotherapy sessions. She separates from her husband Max, partly because she suspects that he still has feelings for his first wife, Susannah and because Max has had problems coming to terms with the birth of their daughter Alice who has Downs Syndrome. Patricia decides to begin a new life in France and leaves taking her mother and two children with her. The character of Patricia does not return until September 1996.

“Patricia Farnham” returns two years later from exile in France to Brookside Close with her mother, Jean Crosbie. Her first action is to deliver divorce papers to Max who is now living in their house on Brookside Close with his first wife, Susannah. The legal document Patricia has given him to sign grants Max virtually no access to his two children, Thomas and Alice and he refuses. Max and Susannah speculate endlessly about Patricia’s true motives for returning to Liverpool. Susannah is particularly furious and believes her to be simply seeking revenge. She constantly makes comments such as “I’m sick of hearing her name. I think it’s time you stopped thinking about your ex wife and started concentrating on us”.

Viewers discover that Patricia has been recalled to the same hospital where she was treated for breast cancer, two years previously. She fears that the cancer has returned and is terrified about her future. In several scenes we see Patricia sobbing “I don’t want to die. I’ve already had my breast removed. If the cancer’s come back it can only mean one thing”.

Max and Susannah are unaware of this. Patricia attends hospital for her biopsy and immediately afterwards discharges herself saying “I may only have a few weeks or months left”. She then visits Max again to urge him to agree to her

divorce settlement but still does not disclose the real reason for her return. Max suspects that she is withholding information from him "There's something you're not telling me." She simply assures him that "this is the last time you'll ever see me" (1.10.96). Patricia returns to France the following day and insists that her parents do not reveal her treatment to Max. Max realises that there is a family secret and decides to follow Patricia to France against Susannah's wishes ("You're doing exactly what she wants you to do. Chasing after her like a lap dog" (2.10.96). Max arrives in France and meets Patricia's new partner. Mistakenly, he assumes that Eric is the reason why Patricia is seeking a swift divorce.

Eventually in an argument with Patricia's father (David) Max complains "Why does the future always have to revolve around Patricia?" At that point David finally reveals the true reason for Patricia's return. "Because she may not have one that's why. She thinks the cancer's come back. She thinks she might be going to die". A distraught Max finds Patricia and reassures her saying "You'll be alright. I know you" Patricia replies "No one has been brave enough to tell me I might not be all right except me. That's why I want to sort everything out with the kids in case the doctor tells me there's nothing else they can do". Max insists that in the event of her death their children should live with him (3.10.96). Patricia is called back urgently to Liverpool for her results. Her final words on leaving her french farmhouse are "I may never see this place again". Although Max has been asked to stay away from the hospital he arrives just as Patricia is called to hear her results. Patricia emerges and leaves hurriedly with Eric. Max demands to know her diagnosis however Patricia refuses to tell him saying "Max I've already told you I don't want you involved in my life. It doesn't matter if I am going to live for five years or five weeks I don't want you and Susannah taking responsibility for Thomas and Alice". Max and Susannah drive back to Brookside Close arguing furiously about Patricia. Max driving so quickly that he fails to notice a neighbour's son run into the street and knocks him down.

Breast cancer in EastEnders

In an episode transmitted 5 November 1996, "Peggy Mitchell", discloses to her daughter in law "Tiffany" that while bathing, she found a lump in her breast but is too frightened to visit her GP. Tiffany advises her to go because "it might be nothing". Peggy refuses to tell her family or partner George and deliberately misses her first GP appointment (18.11.96). She is finally persuaded by Tiffany and while waiting in the GP surgery meets a neighbour Pat who assumes she is there for HRT. Eventually she is referred to a hospital breast clinic (28.11.96) where she meets a consultant radiographer and admits that she has ignored previous invitations for mammograms ("We do encourage preventative screening " Peggy replies "No point in looking for trouble"). She undergoes fine needle aspiration and goes on to meet partner George for lunch. The conversation turns to his first wife who died from leukemia but Peggy still does not reveal that she is worried about her health and George is unaware of her hospital visit. Peggy returns to the Vic and finally breaks down in front of Tiffany. "What if I have got cancer? That's my death sentence. Are my sons going to have to watch me die?" She returns to hospital and is informed that they have identified a solid mass in her breast. Peggy is in shock and as the episode concludes she cries "I've got cancer". She returns to hospital for a biopsy and meets a breast care nurse. Peggy assumes that she will undergo a mastectomy but is assured that "mastectomies are not very common now" and she will probably have a lumpectomy. Peggy discusses her case with the consultant who explains that they will try to save her breast but will not be sure until she undergoes surgery. Peggy breaks off her relationship with George without revealing her diagnosis and George mistakenly blames her son Grant (12.12.96).

Peggy gathers her extended family together and tells them of her diagnosis reassuring them that "Lots of women have breast cancer and make a full recovery". Phil, her elder son, blames himself for the stress and anxiety he has caused his mother. Grant is shocked but surprised and pleased that Tiffany his wife has played such a supportive role, they have been arguing about Tiffany's

lack of responsibility (16.12.96). Peggy goes into hospital but when she does not receive a guarantee that she will come out "one hundred per cent" cancer free she refuses to consent to treatment. George finally discovers what has been happening and convinces Peggy to return for her operation (17.12.96). She successfully undergoes treatment and has a lumpectomy (19.12.96). When Peggy returns to Albert Square she tells no one and uses a visit to her sister as cover story but in a session with the breast care nurse she is advised that "telling people" is a crucial part of the recovery process. In the meantime, George proposes to her and she accepts. On Christmas Day (25.12.96) she visits neighbour, Mark Fowler and apologises for her prejudice and poor behaviour when she discovered he was HIV positive. She confides in him that she has had breast cancer and he is supportive. Peggy then begins her sessions of radiotherapy emerging tired and depressed. She explains "It gets worse as it goes along". The story line is resolved in August when she returns to hospital for a follow up mammogram and is "all clear".

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